

Plato on Democracy and Political *technē*

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Plato on Democracy and Political *technē*

By

Anders Dahl Sørensen



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– Well, does it really seem that the great mass of people in the city would be able to acquire this particular kind of expert knowledge?

– How could they?

Statesman 292e

• • •

There have been times, Socrates, when I have been so much at a loss that I've been driven to take refuge in what Protagoras says, even though I do not believe it at all.

Cratylus 386a

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Note on Editions, Translations and Abbreviations

I have relied on the most recent editions of Plato's Greek text published in the Oxford Classical Texts series (OCT). For the *Republic*, this is that of S.R. Slings (2003); for the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras* and *Laws*, J. Burnet (1903–1907); for the *Statesman*, D.B. Robinson (1995); and for the *Theaetetus*, W.F. Hicken and E.A. Duke (1995). As for translations of Plato, I have, with a few exceptions, quoted from the standard translations found in Cooper 1997, with varying degrees of modification. Where in longer citations no translator is indicated, the translation is my own.

In referring to the works of Plato and other ancient authors, I use standard or self-explanatory abbreviations (e.g. *Resp.* for Plato's *Republic*; [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* for Ps.-Xenophon's *Constitution of the Athenians*; Arist. *Pol.* for Aristotle's *Politics* etc.).

I likewise use the standard abbreviations for traditional works of reference in classical scholarship:

- | | |
|------|---|
| LSJ | H.G. Liddell, R. Scott and H.S. Jones (eds), <i>A Greek-English Dictionary</i> (Oxford, revised 1996) |
| DK | H. Diels and W. Kranz (eds), <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> (Berlin, 9th ed. 1960) |
| TrGF | A. Nauck (ed.), <i>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> (Leipzig, 2nd ed. 1889) |

Introduction

“Of all Plato’s charges against democracy”, Malcolm Schofield writes, “its inability to accommodate true political knowledge is the most fundamental as well as the most Socratic” (2006, 122). For Socrates, as he is portrayed by Plato in the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues, the model for living the right kind of life, ethically and politically, is repeatedly found in the notion of *technē*, ‘craft’ or ‘expertise’, which for him represented the paradigm of rational procedure, aimed at practical benefit and guided by teachable expert knowledge of its own definite subject matter.¹ The choice of this model is motivated by an analogy with well-known and traditional *technai*. It is the *technē* of the shoemaker or the navigator that allows them to produce the best shoes or secure the safest sea journey, respectively. Likewise, Socrates argues, what makes someone able to conduct his own life or the affairs of his community in the best and most rational way possible is the possession of a moral or political *technē*. This Socratic line of argument provides a clear link between the early Socratic dialogues and Plato’s later work, particularly his political philosophy.² Most famous, perhaps, is the image in the *Republic* of the city as a ship whose salvation depends on allowing the expert ‘steersman’ to take charge and navigate it in accordance with his expert knowledge (*Resp.* 488d). As Renford Bambrough puts it, “in the shoes and ships of which Socrates was forever talking we have the origin of Plato’s conception of the philosopher-king, and of the virtue that is equated with knowledge” (1967, 100–101).³

Already in the Socratic dialogues Socrates is made to point to the anti-democratic implications of his notion of political *technē*. In the *Laches*, he

-
- 1 On Plato’s conception of *technē* and its historical background: Heinimann 1961. On the *technē* analogy in the Socratic dialogues: e.g. Penner 1992, 125–126; Kamtekar 2009, 220–221; Klosko 2006, 34; Griswold 2011, 340. Covering what we would call both ‘craft’ (shoemaking, weaving), ‘expertise’ (navigation, music) and even ‘science’ (mathematics, medicine) the Greek term *technē*, as used by Plato, is not easily translatable.
 - 2 There is much to be said for John Stuart Mill’s claim that the “exaltation of Knowledge—[...] scientific knowledge, and scientifically acquired craftsmanship, as the one thing needful in every concern of life, and pre-eminently in government—is the pervading idea in Plato’s practical doctrines” (1978 [1866], 432; cited by Schofield 2006, 139; 144). Cf. Samaras 2002, 2.
 - 3 Cf. Kraut 1999; Penner 2000, 172. This, of course, is not to say that Plato would continue to subscribe to the intellectualist assumptions of the ‘early’ Socrates. In the later dialogues, good government requires not just the mere possession of moral and political *technē*, but also the right moral psychological make-up of its practitioner.

rejects Lysimachus' reliance on majority rule as a guide for conduct and insists that "if something is going to be decided correctly, it must be decided on the basis of knowledge, not the greatest number" (*Lach.* 184e8–9). So they should, he suggests, "investigate first whether any one of us is an expert [τεχνικός] in the subject we're discussing or not. And if one of us is, then we should obey him, even if he is only one, and disregard the others. But if no one of us is an expert, then we must look for someone who is" (184e11–185a3). Likewise in the *Crito*, Socrates reminds his old friend Crito that just as we would always consult a medical expert in questions of physical health, so in the case of questions about justice we should not listen to what the many say but seek out that person "who has knowledge about what is just and unjust—that one person and the truth itself" (*Crit.* 48a5–7).⁴ It is impossible to miss the political bite of these passages. For, of course, in a democracy like Athens the important questions about what to do in matters of justice and injustice, good and bad, *are* in fact decided by the many. Decisions in the popular assembly are made on the basis of simple majority vote, and every male citizen can vote regardless of background. So the Athenian political system is, it seems, by its very nature incompatible with the rule of *technē* that Socrates advocates.

Still today, the perceived force of this criticism of democracy often seems to be matched only by the discomfort with which modern readers contemplate Plato's political alternatives.⁵ But it is important to note that the Socratic criticism of democracy, as a political system incompatible with rule by political *technē*, rests on a crucial assumption. This is the assumption that, as in the cases of other crafts and arts, possession of the political *technē* is the exclusive privilege of the trained specialist. Plato was aware of this and made the assumption explicit. "No great mass of people [πλήθος] of any kind", he has his

4 For these and other anti-democratic passages in the early Plato see Kraut 1999, 39–40; Samaras 2002, 11–13; Schofield 2006, 122. Cf. Kamtekar 2009, 221. As Kraut points out (1999), while the *technē* ideal is indeed a point of continuity throughout all of Plato's work, there are other aspects of the 'early' Socrates that suggest a more complex relation to Athens and democracy (in particular his respect for the personified Laws in the *Crito*).

5 Indeed, it is not only readers of Plato who have felt the force of this argument. Many Europeans and Americans of the last decade have unconsciously been engaging with Socrates when they have caught themselves quietly wondering whether, after all, it would it not be better for everybody—including those countries themselves—if the people of (modern) Greece, Italy or Portugal were to relinquish political sovereignty to economic technocrats, whose expertise could in turn help them find a way out of their current financial swamp? Or whether the so-called 'Chinese model' does not enjoy a comparative advantage over Western democracies in that it reserves a considerable degree of executive power for centralized experts who do not need rely on popular approval? Cf. Dunn 1992, 260; Ober 2008, 3.

Eleatic Stranger spell it out in a dialogue to which we shall return, “would ever be able to acquire this kind of expert knowledge and run a city with reason. We must look instead within a small element in the population—to a few or to the one—to find the right kind of rule” (*Plt.* 297b7–c1). The form of the Socratic argument, in other words, is the following: (1) good government is rule by political *technē*; (2) democracy is rule by the many; (3) political *technē* cannot be the possession of the many; so (4) democracy cannot be good government. Of course, (3) might not seem like a very controversial premise. In fact, Socrates’ assumption here is so natural that those who have reiterated his criticism have rarely felt the need to even make it explicit. After all, are the notions of specialization and exclusivity not implied by the very concept of *technē* and expertise? This is surely why, on most standard accounts of Plato’s critique of democracy, passages like those cited from *Laches* and *Crito* are taken to be his last word on the matter. If what we need is expertise, we should not turn to the people.

The main contention of this book is that, for Plato, it was *not* the last word on the matter. This, I want to stress from the outset, is not to say that Plato rejected the Socratic argument. On the contrary, Plato continued to believe throughout his work that good government is rule by *technē*, in some form or another, and that democracy, as a form of political government, falls short on this account. But unlike Socrates of the early dialogues, as well as many later critics of democracy, he did not think that the soundness of premise (3) was so obvious and natural that it could simply be assumed without argument. Rather, in a number of dialogues he was ready to enter into technical and sophisticated discussions of what both *technē* and democracy would have to look like in order for the two things to be compatible. Can we imagine something like a ‘democratic’ form of political *technē*? Does democracy, as a form of political rule, have an epistemic potential that could serve to block the Socratic argument? In each case, as we shall see, Plato ends up answering this question in the negative. Ultimately it remains the case that political *technē* must be the exclusive privilege of the specialized expert. But in the course of getting to this conclusion, he develops and discusses, with great care and intellectual effort, different versions of what an affirmative, democratic position on this question could look like. Plato was, I suggest, determined to give democracy its best shot.⁶

6 This is not a line of argument that has, to my knowledge, previously been pursued in the literature on Plato’s political thought. Most scholars, it seems, more or less tacitly agree with Samaras who states that “with the exception of [the *Protagoras*], there is no democratic argument fully expounded and then refuted in the whole Platonic corpus” (2002, 74 nn1). The

It is important to make clear the precise nature of my claim here. My investigation of Plato's discussions of democracy's relation to political *technē* should not be understood as an attempt to unearth and reconstruct an original Greek 'democratic theory' to which Plato was directly and consciously responding. On this, the project of the book differs fundamentally from the work of a number of other scholars, such as E.A. Havelock and Cynthia Farrar, who deal with some of the same texts as I do in an effort to recover, respectively, the tenets of a 'liberal' tradition in Greek political thought or the very 'origins of democratic thinking' itself.⁷ As has often been pointed out, a major problem for such a project is the lack of direct, first-hand evidence.⁸ As materials for their reconstruction of Greek democratic theory these scholars are instead forced to rely on texts written within an elite community of intellectual critics of democracy, and this poses the thorny methodological problem of distinguishing with any certainty between the instances when the author is faithfully reproducing the arguments of his opponents and those when he is actively constructing an argument on their behalf or distorting their original position. An appeal to the artistic creativity or political bias of the elite authors themselves too easily becomes a get-out-of-jail card for disposing of those elements that do not fit into the historical reconstruction one is trying to develop. Moreover, the lack of direct evidence for a democratic tradition in Greek political thought may even lead us to question whether there was such a thing in the first place. After all, one should avoid what Moses Finley described as "the curious fallacy [of supposing] that every social and governmental system in history must necessarily have been accompanied by an elaborate theoretical system" (1973, 49).⁹ There need not have been a 'theory of democracy' in order for there to have been a democracy. So we may wonder whether not "the hunt for a formal Athenian democratic theory is ultimately chimerical, because in Athens, democratic theory neither attained nor required independent textual existence as such" (Ober 1998, 32).¹⁰

My investigation into Plato's discussions of democracy's claim to political *technē*, in contrast with those mentioned above, is first and foremost an investigation of *Plato's* political thought, not that of others. It is an examination of the arguments Plato has his characters give for and against the notion of a democ-

one notable exception is Schofield (2006), whose subsection on the question of 'democratic knowledge' in Plato also includes a brief discussion of the *Statesman* (121–129).

7 In particular, Havelock 1957 and Farrar 1988.

8 Cf. Jones 1957, 41–42; Ober 1998, 32.

9 Cf. Ober 1996, 132.

10 Cf. Finley 1973, 28; 48–49; Samaras 2002, 62–63.

racy ruled by expertise, rather than an attempt to get at something or someone beyond the text itself to whom that notion might be historically attributed.¹¹ But to treat the arguments of the dialogues in this way is not to deny that the question itself must be seen in a broader, historical and cultural context. On the one hand, of course, the very idea of questioning the justification of a political regime by reference to its epistemic potential, its capacity for ruling in accordance with *technē* and expertise, might seem distinctively Platonic. After all, most ordinary Athenians would presumably not have thought this the most appropriate question to ask. For them the value and justification of the democratic regime was first and foremost to be found in its promotion and preservation of political non-domination. As John Dunn puts it, “the task for which democracy was initially devised, and for which it has very palpable advantages, was the avoidance of direct subjugation”, not “the steady genesis of valid understanding” (1992, 261).¹² This was also how the so-called Old Oligarch, a fifth-century political pamphleteer, understood it. Although highly critical of the democratic regime, he nonetheless acknowledges that it gives the *dēmos* what they want and value: the enjoyment of political freedom and the avoidance of enslavement ([Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.8).¹³ Hence when Plato chooses to investigate and discuss different ways in which one might go about providing democracy with an epistemic justification in the form of a claim to political *technē*, he is addressing a concern that may have seemed more important to him than it did to many of his fellow Athenians. Given the importance *he* attaches to role of *technē* in moral and political life, it becomes of great importance *to him* to know whether democratic government could be compatible with government by political expertise.¹⁴ On the other hand, however, all this is not to say that ordinary Athenians would have taken his question to be wholly irrelevant to an evaluation of their political regime. As Josiah Ober has shown through an analysis of Athenian political discourse, a belief in the superiority of the *dēmos*’ col-

11 Note that this does not mean that I will not occasionally use external evidence, particularly on Gorgias and Protagoras, in my interpretation of Plato’s text. This evidence can be helpful in filling out those gaps in Plato’s portrayals which his own readers would easily have been able fill out for themselves given the fame of these two figures in classical Athens.

12 Cf. Schofield 2006, 136–137.

13 I return to the Old Oligarch and his analysis of democracy in Chapter One.

14 If we, too, find this question one of the most appropriate and pertinent to ask about democracy today, then that might, partly at least, be a testimony to the immense influence of Plato’s thought on the Western way of thinking about the most fundamental issues in ethics and politics.

lective wisdom was a central tenet in the democratic ideology.¹⁵ It was, in other words, a deep-seated assumption among the Athenians themselves that their form of government could be epistemically justified, even if this assumption itself served a distinctively political rather than a purely theoretical function. Viewed against this background, Plato's investigation constitutes a direct intervention in the political discussions of his day. His discussions in defense of the Socratic argument are aimed, at least in part, at problematizing and undermining central pillars of the Athenian ideological belief-system.¹⁶

It is also helpful, I think, to compare and contrast the claim made in this book with another, more recent, trend in the study of Plato's political thought. In a pushback against the traditional commonplace of holding Plato up as the quintessential arch-enemy of democracy, a number of scholars have developed readings of him that strive to mitigate and nuance this opposition by locating him and his work within a larger context of a distinctively democratic culture and way of life. Thus aspects of Plato's thought and work—like his alleged portrayal of the *herrschaftsfreie* dialogue as the ideal model of discourse, his insistence on the important value of 'frank speech', and the Platonic Socrates' 'shameless' lack of concern for the opinion of others—are taken to suggest that Plato, far from renouncing democracy and everything it stands for, is engaged in a charitable reflection on democratic practices and the potential they hold for the conception of philosophy he tried to develop and advocate.¹⁷ These readings are right to insist that Plato's relation to democracy is more complex than it is sometimes presented as being, even if they occasionally overstate their case and fail to consider whether what looks like 'appreciation' might not rather be 'appropriation'. But setting aside the question of their individual merits or demerits, what is important to note is how this approach differs from the project undertaken here. I too argue for a more nuanced understanding of Plato's engagement with democracy, but I do not do so by pointing to

15 Ober 1989, 163–165; 1998, 33–36.

16 Ober likewise finds in Plato's political philosophy the attempt to undermine the Athenian belief in collective wisdom (1998, ch. 4), but it is striking how, with the exception of *Republic* and *Gorgias*, he does not discuss any of those dialogues where that belief is subjected to actual philosophical discussion. Had he looked at, say, the *Statesman* or the *Protagoras* he would, I think, have found it more difficult to exclude Plato from those elite writers who were "willing to consider the concept of collective wisdom seriously" (1989, 163).

17 E.g. Euben 1996 (the Habermasian dimension of the Socratic dialogue); Monoson 2000 (the value of *parrhēsia*); Saxonhouse 2006 (Socratic shamelessness as 'democratic'). Cf. also Saxonhouse 1996.

specific aspects of democracy that positively appealed to him and which he adopted into his own thought. On the contrary, I concentrate on an aspect Plato's political thought that is unquestionably critical of the Athenian form of political rule: his rejection of democracy as unable to accommodate political *technē*. But what I am arguing is that, on this specific question at least, his rejection of democracy was not as straightforward and automatic as it is often portrayed as being. He was—this is my main claim—ready to consider the democratic case carefully and with an open mind. On my reading, then, his discussion of democracy is 'nuanced' in the sense that it lets the other side defend itself as best it can (or rather, as best he thought it could). That said, however, my investigation will suggest that there are indeed, in Plato, some gestures towards a more substantial rapprochement. Thus in one dialogue at least (the *Statesman*), Plato's discussion of democracy and political *technē* does, I argue, result in a qualified endorsement of popular rule of a particular kind.

Having situated my project *vis-à-vis* other approaches, I turn now to a presentation of the investigation itself. I believe that sustained discussion of democracy and political *technē* is found, primarily, in four of Plato's dialogues (*Gorgias*, *Statesman*, *Protagoras*, *Theaetetus*), and chapters Two to Five of the book are accordingly devoted to separate readings of each of these texts. I begin, however, with another dialogue, the *Republic* (Chapter One). For while that dialogue does not itself take up for systematic consideration what democratic epistemic competence could actually look like, it does, in one passage, suggest the possibility of something like democratic expert rule and sets the stage for how that possibility is approached in other dialogues. On my reading, Socrates' discussion with Thrasymachus in Book 1 gradually reveals the sophist as subscribing to a view of real existing political regimes—including democracies—as expertly skilled in ruling in their own factional interest. Socrates critically responds to this view by raising the important question of the nature of *technē* itself. What does it mean for a society to be governed by political expertise? Socrates' argument in *Republic* 1 is brief and inconclusive, and the discussion of Thrasymachus' political thesis is soon abandoned in favour of an examination of his provocative statements concerning the alleged advantages of injustice. But it at least reveals to us Plato's awareness that the Socratic approach to the question of democracy's relation to political expertise was not one that could not simply be taken for granted.

The questions that lurk beneath the discussion with Thrasymachus in *Republic* 1 are taken up for serious consideration in the dialogues *Gorgias* and *Statesman*. Both of these works, I argue, positively address the question of democracy's epistemic foundations. My second chapter, on the *Gorgias*, fo-

cuses on Socrates' famous denial of the status of *technē* to rhetoric. I argue that Socrates' suggestion that rhetoric cannot be a *technē* is not only based on a claim about what rhetoric aims at (pleasure, rather than the good). It is also based on a claim about the efficiency of a political system that relies on rhetoric as the means by which it pursues its goals. At the heart of the political theory of the dialogue is a diagnosis of the power relations of democratic politics: the dominance of the *dēmos* over its would-be leaders has the effect of making mere 'experience' (*empeiria*) politically authoritative and thus to render impossible the truly scientific pursuit of political goals. However, in the *Gorgias* this suggested association of democracy with reliance on experience of some sort, rather than on genuine scientific method, has not yet taken centre stage. This changes in the *Statesman* (Chapter Three). While the discussions in the two dialogues have much in common, it is significant how the *Statesman* both makes the question of epistemic justification more central and presents the epistemic performance of democracy in a much more positive light than does the *Gorgias*. In the *Statesman*, I will argue, the Eleatic Stranger shows how a law-abiding democratic regime belongs among the 'better imitations' of the ideal political rule by an expert statesman. Two senses of 'imitation' are at work in this claim. The law-abiding democracy 'imitates' ideal rule in that it wrongly makes itself out to be ruled by expertise in virtue of its ancient and 'wise' laws. But it also 'imitates' ideal rule *better* than others do in the sense that it in fact succeeds in reproducing it in some respect. This is because, on the Stranger's view, the established ancestral laws, being the result of long experience and collective deliberation, do have considerable value for a society. In fact, I will argue, they are the very same kind of laws as the ideal expert statesman *himself* would lay down for his city to follow if he were to be absent for a period of time. To be sure, given the nature of laws, as general principles covering all particular cases, the laws of the law-abiding democratic city can never truly acquire the accuracy that characterizes genuine *technē*. So the Socratic argument still stands. But in the *Statesman*, law-abiding democracy, though less efficient than other law-abiding regimes, nonetheless comes off remarkably well.

While the notion of collective experience also plays a central role in the discussion of democracy's epistemic potential in the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*, the form of that discussion is very different. For in these dialogues, which are discussed in Chapter Four and Five respectively, Plato turns the argument for democracy's claim to political *technē* into a fully fledged philosophical theory and lays it into the mouth of one particular character, Protagoras of Abdera. I argue for a 'unified' reading of the two main portrayals of the sophist in Plato. In both the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus* Protagoras is challenged by Socrates to account for the compatibility between the egalitarianism of his famous 'mea-

sure doctrine', on the one side, and his own claim to the epistemic authority of an expert, on the other. Likewise in both dialogues he is made to defend his position by offering an interpretation of the measure doctrine as implying a distinctively 'democratic' conception of expert authority. What establishes expert authority, including Protagoras' own, is not the possession of objectively true beliefs; it is the reasoned consensus around certain beliefs and practices as useful. Here, my reading of the Platonic Protagoras can be seen as the return to a line of interpretation that was once popular but has long been neglected. With his explanation of expert authority in terms of the intersubjective experience of usefulness, rather than by appeal to objective, non-relativistic truth, the sophist is interpreted as developing a theory of wisdom along what we might anachronistically call 'social pragmatist' lines. This understanding of the Protagorean position, I suggest, not only makes better sense of the details of the portrayal of the sophist in Plato. It also turns the author of the measure doctrine into a much more formidable foe. Rather than the proponent of what would otherwise be an utterly eccentric and theoretically barren relativism, Protagoras emerges as the representative of Plato's most subtle and sophisticated suggestion for how one might go about providing democracy with an epistemic justification.

While the position attributed to Protagoras is thus the same in both of the two 'Protagorean' dialogues, we shall see that the emphasis is markedly different. In the *Protagoras*, the measure doctrine is never explicitly mentioned, but the political stakes are on the surface: it is ultimately about the 'wisdom' of the Athenian way of politics, that is, about the wisdom of democracy. The discussion of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, by contrast, presents itself as first and foremost a discussion about epistemology, and so, while the measure doctrine is here the declared subject of investigation, considerable work is needed to discern the political undercurrent in the argument. Moreover, in the two dialogues Socrates employs different strategies in his attempt to refute the sophist. In the *Protagoras* he attempts to problematize the optimistic outlook on the human condition that underlies Protagoras' argument. Do we not need a fundamental distinction between objective truth and mere appearance, and thus a denial of the measure doctrine, if we want to maintain both a belief in human reason as sufficient for living well *and* to explain the common phenomenon of wrongdoing? The *Protagoras*, however, also hints at a deeper problem for Protagoras, which is taken up in the *Theaetetus*. How does the sophist's democratic theory of expert authority fare in the face of fundamental disagreement between him and everybody else regarding the very basis of that theory? Does his theory live up to those standards for wisdom it itself sets up? I argue that Socrates' famous self-refutation argument in the *Theaetetus* can only be made to work

once we see that what Socrates is refuting is the fully fledged theory of wisdom, defended by Protagoras in his so-called 'defense speech', rather than the measure doctrine as Socrates initially interprets it. Besides making better sense of the argument, my reading has the advantage of presenting both Protagoras and Socrates in a more charitable light. Protagoras emerges as the proponent of a sophisticated theory with clear political implications, rather than of a bizarre epistemological claim. Socrates emerges as someone who is willing to tackle the best case that can be made for his opponent, rather than as someone who lets his opponent defend himself only to then ignore that defense and continue beating a straw man.

As will already be clear from this prospective summary of the five chapters, for Plato the question of democracy's epistemic credentials remained closely bound up with questions about the nature of *technē* itself. In fact, it was Plato's philosophical engagements with democracy that led him to raise a number of those theoretical issues that served to critically sharpen his own conception of what true political expertise must look like and imply. What is the proper aim of *technē*? What is the relation between expertise and law? How should we conceptualise the nature and source of expert authority? In this sense, the investigation undertaken in this book is not only an investigation into Plato's discussions of a particular, really existing form of political government. It is also an investigation into his thinking about the nature of what he took to be the ideal form of political government. The challenge posed by the notion of democratic expert rule forced him to clarify what he himself understood by a rule by true expertise.

However, the model of *technē* was not the only way to conceptualise political knowledge in antiquity. The book ends with an epilogue that, besides summing up the five chapters, points to how Plato's discussion of democracy's epistemic potential, centered around the notion of *technē*, significantly differs from the approach to the question taken by Aristotle (and by modern democratic theorists). Aristotle famously argued in the *Politics* that democratic mass deliberation could, under certain circumstances, be epistemically superior to rule by an expert. As in a pot-luck dinner, the diversity of opinions and viewpoints that go into democratic decision-making can contribute to the formulation of wiser policies. I suggest that a similar argument can in fact be discerned in the account of ancient Persia under the reign of Cyrus from *Laws* 3. But here, as in the other dialogues discussed in this book, Plato makes sure to clearly circumscribe whatever pro-democratic conclusions we might be tempted to draw from that argument. If there is in fact an epistemic potential in democratic diversity, it is one that can only be utilized in a system that denies the ultimate political authority to the people.

When Friedrich Nietzsche wished to explain why he preferred Thucydides to Plato what he pointed to was the unprejudiced and open-minded character of the former's investigation into morals and politics. It was not that the historian of the Peloponnesian War completely abstained from normative evaluation and judgment; but he was strong enough not to let his own prejudices get the better of him, and ready to sincerely look for "ein Quantum guter Vernunft" in all characters and in all outlooks (1999 [1881], 150–151).¹⁸ Plato, on the other hand, was despised by Nietzsche as "ein Feigling vor der Realität", as someone who cowardly rejected as simply irrational and illogical all views and positions that did not align with his own ethical and political preferences: those who disagreed with him must, he assumed, be animated by something other than reason and intelligence, and he portrayed them accordingly (1999 [1889], 155–156).

I believe a major contribution of this book is to show how, in the case of democracy at least, this Nietzschean characterisation of the 'cowardly' Plato is one-sided at best. It may be that democracy's claim to political *technē* is ultimately rejected by him, together with the Athenian form of government itself. But this rejection is not, or at least not always, based on a prejudiced refusal to even look for "good reason" in the democratic position. On the contrary, in a number of his most important dialogues Plato does explore in an open-minded way the case for an epistemic justification of democracy and, in the case of Protagoras, presents its proponent as a rational, even sympathetic, and certainly philosophically interesting, figure. The "reality" that most directly faced Plato was the reality of Athenian democracy. And in the face of *this* reality, he was not the coward Nietzsche made him out to be.

18 Cf. Geuss 2005, 220–221; Williams 1993, 161–162; Schofield 2006, 197–198.

Thrasymachus' Challenge: Political Sociology and Expert Rule in *Republic* 1

That Plato's willingness to consider and discuss democracy's epistemic credentials has not previously been given its due presumably has to do with the dominant position occupied by the *Republic* in most accounts of his political philosophy. After all, few would be tempted to suggest that the case for democracy's claim to expert rule is being given anything like its 'best shot' in *that* dialogue. On the contrary, it is precisely in the *Republic* that we find one of the most uncompromising expressions of the Socratic insistence on an absolute and unbridgeable divide between popular rule and rule by *technē*. In the famous image of the ship of state in Book 6, the *dēmos* is compared to a strong but rather dull ship-owner, while the democratic politicians are represented as equally ignorant sailors who fight over control of the ship without ever having actually studied and learned the craft of seafaring (*Resp.* 488a8–c2). All that matters on a 'ship' like this is to hold power and use it for personal gratification: neither ship-owner nor sailors care much for how the ship is actually steered (c4–d4). So it is not surprising that the true expert in seafaring has no place in a society like this. He is rejected and neglected, as a useless and pathetic figure, even though, as Socrates points out, it is only by means of his expertise that the ship could be steered in the right way (d4–8).¹ The case is no different when we turn to the other famous discussion of democracy in the *Republic*, the satirical portrayal of the democratic city in Book 8 (557a2–558c5). When the freedom to live as one pleases becomes the highest value in a society, as it does in a democracy, the foundational ideals of Socrates' best city—education and knowledge—must end up politically and socially marginalized. In a democracy, the *dēmos* does not want to be ruled by anyone, and they support only those leaders who promise to defend and promote their freedom, "giving no thought to what someone was doing before he entered public life" (558b5–6). In fact, even if they had cared for knowledge and expertise, these would hardly be widely available in a democratic city. For the

1 On the ship of state as an illustration of democracy's problematic relation to political expertise: Samaras 2002, 68–69; Schofield 2006, 27; 123; Keyt 2006, 193–201. I return to the *Republic's* use of the ship of state image in Chapter Three in order to compare it to a similar, but significantly different, use of the same image in the *Statesman*.

democratic life-style, with its inherent lack of discipline and order, lends itself only very poorly to the cultivation of serious intellectual pursuits, like philosophy (561c6–d8).²

Of course, that the very possibility of positive epistemic capacities on the part of democracy is so consistently left out of consideration in the *Republic* is to a large extent a function of the core philosophical principles that govern the main argument of this particular dialogue. One of these concerns the pre-conditions for the proper exercise of *technē* itself. The point here is not just that Socrates in the *Republic* develops an extremely demanding conception of political expert knowledge, making it hard to imagine how the majority of people could ever come to possess the philosophical talent and training necessary to obtain it.³ What precludes from the outset any notion of something like democratic expert rule in this dialogue is also and more specifically Socrates' repeated insistence on division of labour as a necessary requirement for the proper practice of any *technē* whatsoever: performing an expertise in the right way requires that one devotes oneself wholly and exclusively to that particular occupation (370b5–7; 434a5–6).⁴ The political implication of this 'one person-one *technē*' principle is clear: since any society would require most of its citizens to be habitually engaged in manual labour and the production of provisions, not to mention warfare, a rule by the people at large can never be a proper rule by political *technē*.

Furthermore, a different but equally important reason for the *Republic*'s uncompromising attitude to the question of expert democracy can be found in the dialogue's peculiar approach to political analysis. Guided by the heuristic analogy between the city and the soul, the *Republic* analyses political systems first and foremost in terms of their moral psychological make-up, and this analysis is in turn assumed to have direct implications for their respective epistemic qualities (or lack thereof). Hence, since democracy is shown to be a political system dominated by undisciplined appetitive desires, it must by definition be without any share in the epistemic qualities that belong to a city ruled by the rational desires characteristic of the philosopher-guardians. On the analytical model employed in the main argument of the *Republic*, in

2 On these aspects of the double-portrayal of the democratic city and the democratic life-style in Book 8: Samaras 2002, 66–67; Schofield 2006, 107–112; 117–121.

3 Though he definitely does do that: 428e3–429a3; 476b9–11; 493e2–494a3; 495b2; 503b6–d11.

4 On the principle of division of labour in the *Republic*: Schofield 1993, 190–191; cf. Samaras 2002, 24–25.

other words, the question whether democratic rule can claim to be a rule by *technē* is simply not allowed to surface.⁵

So it is clearly not on the *Republic* that I base my main contention in this book. Nevertheless, the dialogue serves well as a starting-point for the argument to be pursued in subsequent chapters. For while the question of democracy's claim to expert rule plays no role in the main argument of the *Republic*, it is in fact hinted at, briefly and inconclusively, by one of the chief characters of Book 1. As we shall see, Thrasymachus, whose provocative claim that the unjust life is better than the just provides the impetus for the dialogue's main project, begins by formulating another, more political, version of his position, one that has direct implications for the question of democracy and political *technē*. In effect, I will argue in this chapter, Thrasymachus defends a view of city-state politics as dominated by faction-based expert regimes, democracy prominent among them. That the implications of his view are not explicitly drawn, let alone thematised, in the remainder of the *Republic* does not mean that Plato was not aware of them. As the following chapters will show, Thrasymachus' challenge was one he would openly take up in a number of other dialogues.

Thrasymachus' Political Account of Justice

As is often pointed out, the central problem that sets the stage for the main argument of the *Republic* is first introduced by Thrasymachus in Book 1 when he notoriously suggests that justice is "another's good" (ἀλλότριον ἀγαθόν, 343c3–4).⁶ To be just, Thrasymachus explains, is not in the agent's own best interest, but rather in the interest of other people. When the just man abstains from cheating in his business dealings, conscientiously pays his taxes, and does not abuse his power whilst holding public office, he is really failing to pursue his own interest and is instead making himself vulnerable to being "outdone" by people who do not have such scruples (343d2–344a3). What the unjust man does is simply to promote his own interest at the expense of others (343e6–344a3), and the happiest man is therefore the ruthless tyrant who commits the greatest injustice against his subjects with impunity (344a4–c4). Injustice pays, in short, whereas to be just is simply "high-minded naïveté" (348c12). It is this provocative and subversive thesis that Glaucon and Adeimantus take up and

5 On the *Republic*'s moral psychological framework for political analysis, and its blind spots: Williams 1999 [1973]; 1993, 42–46.

6 E.g. Maguire 1971, 155–156; Annas 1981, 45; Samaras 2002, 24; Nederman 2007, 30.

reformulate in their famous 'challenge' to Socrates in the beginning of Book 2. Socrates' arguments against Thrasymachus were not very persuasive, they complain, and they now want him to return to the question again and convince them that it is inherently better to be just than unjust, even if injustice can be committed with complete impunity (357a–367e). What they get in response to this request is Socrates' elaborate argument, developed in the course of the remaining books of the *Republic*, about the nature of justice as a beneficial harmony of hierarchically ordered elements in the city and in the soul. Justice does pay, so Socrates maintains, for only a just man with a harmonious soul is truly happy (cf. 444e–445b; 580a–c).

However, the thesis that justice is another's good is not the only thesis put forward by Thrasymachus in *Republic* 1. In fact, when he first intervenes in the discussion, taking over the mantle as Socrates' main interlocutor from Polemarchus, it is with a very different account of justice. What he claims, with much fanfare, is that "the just is nothing but the advantage of the stronger" (τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον, 338c2–3). Forced by Socrates to explain what he means more clearly, he goes on immediately to provide the following elaboration of his claim:

Thrasymachus: Don't you know that some cities are ruled as a tyranny, some as a democracy, and some as an aristocracy?

Socrates: Of course.

Thrasymachus: And in each city this element is stronger, namely, the ruler?

Socrates: Certainly.

Thrasymachus: And each makes laws to its own advantage. Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have laid down as law—what is to their advantage—to be just for the ruled, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all the cities, the advantage of the established regime. Since the established regime is surely stronger, anyone who really thinks about it will realise that the just is the same everywhere, namely, the advantage of the stronger.

Resp. 338d6–339a4; trans. GRUBE/REEVE, modified

What Thrasymachus here offers, as an explanation of his claim that justice is the advantage of the stronger, is a sociological theory of political rule. It is a fact of political realities, he claims, that cities are governed by faction-based regimes (rule by the many, the few, or a single person) who use legislation to

set up the political system in a way that serve their own political interests and declare that what is just for the ruled is to obey those laws. Thus what we call 'justice' can really be reduced to a question of who holds political power in a city. That Plato saw this theory of justice as a freestanding doctrine, despite juxtaposing it with other ideas in *Republic* 1, is clear from a parallel passage in *Laws* 4. "Some say", the Athenian Stranger reports at one point in that dialogue, "that there are as many kinds of laws as there are political systems [...]. For these people take the line that the laws must not be directed to waging war or attaining complete virtue, but to what is the advantage of the established political system, whatever that is" (*Laws* 714b3–c2). Since the laws are in each case declared by the rulers to be "just" (δικαία), justice, on this view, is rightly said to be "the advantage of the stronger" (714c3–d7). Whether Plato meant this passage from the *Laws* as a reference to the historical Thrasymachus, to the Thrasymachus of *Republic* 1, or to a more widespread contemporary view, is difficult to say.⁷ But it does closely echo Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, both in content and language, and shows that Plato conceived of his first account of justice, as the advantage of the stronger, as an independent theory that someone might hold and defend.

Returning to the *Republic*, a number of commentators have rightly pointed out that this first account of justice is clearly very different from Thrasymachus' later account of justice as 'another's good'. For one thing, the scope of application is different in the two accounts. It is clear that, from the perspective of the subjects in a city, justice can be both 'the advantage of the stronger' and 'another's good'. But this is obviously not the case for the rulers themselves. For them, if justice is 'the advantage of the stronger', it is precisely their *own* good.⁸ More importantly, however, when we turn to the content of justice, the two accounts do not seem to be speaking about the same thing at all. On Thrasymachus' account of justice as another's good, the content of justice is assumed to be a set of conventional moral norms. The just man is promoting the interests of another, rather than himself, when he conducts his business dealings fairly, pays his taxes, and does not misuse his public office for per-

7 Cf. Maguire 1971, 143–144; Schöpsdau 2003, 194–195; Nederman 2007, 35–37. Schöpsdau, however, is clearly wrong to assume that this is the theory Glaucon is referring to when he later relates what he has heard "from Thrasymachus and a thousand others" (*Resp.* 358c7–8). What Glaucon has in mind, as his subsequent challenge shows, is first and foremost Thrasymachus' *second* account of justice as "another's good" (cf. 347d8–e4 with 368b5–7). On the problems of determining the views of the historical Thrasymachus (as opposed to Thrasymachus in the *Republic*): Betti 2011.

8 Maguire 1971, 146; Annas 1981, 45.

sonal gain (343d3–e7). The unjust tyrant becomes the happiest man of all when he systematically and successfully transgresses normal rules of moral conduct: enslaving the citizens and stealing their property (344a4–c4). The claim that justice is another's good, in short, is the claim that traditional accepted morality (honesty, fairness, conscientiousness etc.) is a fool's game. On the account of justice as the advantage of the stronger, by contrast, the content of justice is explicitly explained as a function of the type of regime that lays them down: "democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws", etc. Thus the content of justice here can hardly be generally accepted moral norms. Presumably, any regime would want to legislate against, or at least try to discourage, criminal acts such as fraud, perjury, stealing, rape etc. Rather, the laws that Thrasymachus primarily has in mind here seem to concern the institutions, structures and practices that serve the distinctively political purpose of consolidating or strengthening the regime's hold on power.⁹ Plato makes this explicit in the parallel passage from *Laws* 4. The laws must look to the advantage of the established political system, "in order that it remains continuously in power and is never overthrown" (ὅπως ἄρξει τε αἰεὶ καὶ μὴ καταλυθῇσεται, 714c2–3; cf. d3).

What we find in the transition from Thrasymachus' first to his second account of justice in *Republic* 1 is thus a change of context: when he moves from 'advantage of the stronger' to 'another's good', he goes from a distinctively political account of justice, as a relation between rulers and ruled, to a distinctively moral account of justice, as a relation between individuals.¹⁰ Earlier literature on Thrasymachus' argument was dominated by the question whether these two accounts of justice, one political and one moral, are as compatible as Thrasymachus himself seems to think (cf. 343c3–4; 344c5–9).¹¹ By now, a fragile consensus seems to have emerged to the effect that while the two accounts may not strictly speaking add up to a consistent position,

9 Maguire 1971, 146–147; Nederman 2007, 34–35. One example, suggested by Nederman (33), could be what is 'just' in regard to political participation: a democratic regime will promote the view that justice is for all citizens to be able to serve in law-courts, attend the assembly or hold public office, whereas an oligarchic regime would limit such participation to the upper classes, also in the name of justice.

10 For this diagnosis: Maguire 1971, 149–152; cf. Klosko 1984, 13; Nederman 2007, 29; 33. As Nederman (29) points out, this shift is reflected in the way ἀγαθόν supplants συμφέρον as the term for advantage/benefit.

11 Commentators who have, in different ways, argued for consistency include: Kerferd (1947), Hourani (1962), Henderson (1970), and Nicholson (1974). The case for inconsistency has been forcefully argued by Maguire (1971).

they are nonetheless expressions of a single underlying vision or idea. “Thrasymachus shifts in his attempts to say what justice is”, Julia Annas writes, but his ideas “are controlled by the thought that whatever it is it is not worth much” (1981, 46).¹² In this chapter, however, my intention is not to revisit this old question yet again. Rather, what I want to do here is to focus specifically on, and look closer at, Thrasymachus’ political account of justice and what he takes it to imply. As we shall see, an analysis of this part of the dialogue serves well as a starting point for my larger investigation of Plato’s discussions of democracy’s epistemic capacities. For I will argue that although the main argument of the *Republic* does not take up the question of democracy’s claim to be a rule by *technē*, this question is in fact implied, if not openly thematised, by the sociological theory on which Thrasymachus bases his political account of justice as the advantage of the stronger. This will emerge once we turn to consider the peculiar way he responds to Socrates’ objections to that account.

Rulers in the Strict Sense

In *Republic* 1, Socrates challenges Thrasymachus’ political account of justice by means of a fairly simple line of argument. As we saw, Thrasymachus presents his initial claim about justice (‘the advantage of the stronger’) as based on a sociological theory of political rule: in all cities the rulers lay down laws in their own interest for the ruled to follow and then call those laws ‘justice’ (338d6–339a4). What Socrates does in the argument that follows is to attempt to drive a wedge in between Thrasymachus’ initial claim and its sociological elaboration. He makes two preliminary moves. First, he paraphrases Thrasymachus’ political sociology as a strictly legalist theory of justice. On this reformulation (which I will return to below), what is just is simply “to obey the rulers” (339b9–10), by which he means to obey the laws laid down by the rulers (339c4–5). Second, he gets Thrasymachus to admit that rulers in the cities are not infallible: when they legislate for the ruled, they sometimes do not succeed in making laws that are in fact in their own interest (339c1–12). On this basis, Socrates can then go on to suggest that Thrasymachus’ sociological elaboration is not really equivalent to his original claim. After all, if justice is simply obedience to the rulers’ laws, then it is just for the ruled to obey the rulers’ laws whether or not those laws are in fact in the rulers’ interest. But the rulers sometimes make laws that

12 Cf. also Klosko 1984, 9–10; Schütrumpf 1997, 39–40; Barney 2006, 45.

are not in their own interest. So in those cases, Socrates points out, it will be the case that what is just is not in the interest of the stronger (339d1–e8).

What Thrasymachus does in response to this argument has caused a considerable degree of puzzlement among commentators on the *Republic*. Before he even has a chance to reply, Cleitophon intervenes on his behalf and suggests a seemingly attractive way for Thrasymachus to circumvent the challenge posed by Socrates' argument. According to Cleitophon, what Thrasymachus really meant to capture with the phrase 'the advantage of the stronger' was "what the stronger *thinks* is in his interest" (340b7). This would avoid the problem raised by Socrates. After all, while the rulers might be mistaken about what is in fact in their interest, they could hardly be mistaken about what they think is in their interest. But Thrasymachus does not take this route. In fact, when offered the choice by Socrates of adopting Cleitophon's interpretation, he summarily brushes it aside and wants nothing to do with it. Instead he launches into his own, very different, line of defense:

Thrasymachus: Not at all! Do you think I call someone who makes a mistake 'stronger' when he makes a mistake?

Socrates: I did think that was what you meant when you agreed that the rulers aren't infallible but do make mistakes.

Thrasymachus: Well, that's because you're a sycophant in arguments, Socrates. When someone makes a mistake in the treatment of patients, do you call him a doctor in regard to that very mistake? Or when someone makes a mistake in calculation, do you call him a mathematician in regard to that very mistake in calculation? I think we do use words like 'the doctor made a mistake', or likewise with the mathematician or the grammarian. But each of these, in so far as he is what we call him, never makes a mistake. Therefore, in the strict sense (since you also like strict language), no craftsman ever makes a mistake. For it's when his expert knowledge has failed him that someone makes a mistake, and in this regard he is not a craftsman. No craftsman, expert, or ruler makes a mistake at the moment when he is ruling, even though everyone would say that a doctor or a ruler makes a mistake. It is in this loose way you should take the answer I gave just now. But the most strict way of looking at it is this: the ruler, in so far as he rules, does not make mistakes but unerringly puts down what is best for himself, and this the ruled has to do. Therefore I maintain what I've said from the outset: the just is to do what is to the advantage of the stronger.

Resp. 340c6–341a4; trans. GRUBE/REEVE, modified

Thrasymachus' defense turns on the crucial assumption that ruling, like medicine or mathematics, is a form of expertise (*technē*), namely the expertise of legislating in one's own interest. Since to rule simply is to exercise this expertise, any mistakes in legislating in one's own interest are not strictly speaking manifestations of ruling. This move allows Thrasymachus to take back his previous admission that rulers are fallible. When he said that rulers sometimes fail to lay down laws to their own advantage, he was in fact using the term ruler in a loose, non-technical sense. But "in the strict sense" (κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον, 340e1–2), he now insists, a ruler never makes a mistake in legislating in his own interest. If he did, he would not be a ruler.

This is a curious and puzzling line of argument. For one thing, as Julia Annas points out, the notion of experts in the strict sense seems "very counter-intuitive" (1981, 43). After all, are we really prepared to accept as true that a doctor strictly speaking ceases to be a doctor whenever he makes a mistake in the treatment of patients? While formally saving the consistency of Thrasymachus' position, this "verbal move" seems to completely "flout our beliefs about doctors, rulers etc." (43).¹³ But more importantly, the introduction of rulers in the strict sense into the argument seems not at all helpful for Thrasymachus' purposes in this part of the discussion. Thrasymachus clearly wishes to present himself as the hard-headed realist cynically debunking popular illusions by pointing out that what we think of as justice can in fact be reduced to a matter of the distribution of political power. "Justice", he declares, is in fact "*nothing but* [οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ] the advantage of the stronger" (338c2–3).¹⁴ But on his new position, it is no longer clear how Thrasymachus' view tells us anything about *what we call justice*. Justice is now understood to be obedience to those laws that would be laid down by a perfect infallible ruler in his own interest. But how do we know if some existing law lives up to this criterion? Thrasymachus' new position seems strikingly unsuited to serve its debunking purpose. For it is not clear what it is debunking.¹⁵

13 Cf. Cross and Woozley 1964, 47.

14 Cf. 338e6–339a2: "This, then, is what I say justice is, *the same in all the cities*, the advantage of the established regime." On Thrasymachus as a debunker of justice: Guthrie 1969, 93; Flew 1995, 441–443; Balot 2006, 106; Stauffer 2009, 2.

15 Versions of this problem are formulated by Wells 1882, 156; Harrison 1967, 31; Klosko 1984, 15; Everson 1998, 121–122. Cf. also Cross and Woozley 1964, 48. Note that the problem cannot be explained away by arguing that Thrasymachus simply intends the introduction of rulers in the strict sense to serve as preparation for his idealisation of the successful tyrant in his second, moral account of justice (344a4–c4). As we have seen, the figure of the perfect tyrant is very different from the notion of a perfect ruler in the strict sense, and the former

So we are faced with a difficult question. Why does Thrasymachus pursue his curious argument about the *technē* of ruling at this point? After all, he could also have chosen to adopt the attractive proposal offered to him by Cleitophon.¹⁶ A widespread strategy for dealing with this question has been to suggest that the implausibility of Thrasymachus' argument reveals an underlying agenda on Plato's part. More specifically, it has been proposed that what we get in the curious argument about rulers in the strict sense is the literary 'manipulation' of the figure of Thrasymachus for Plato's own purposes in the *Republic*. For while that argument may not be the most logical or plausible argument for Thrasymachus to make at this point, it does serve to redirect the discussion towards the important notion of the ideal expert ruler and, shortly afterwards, allows Socrates to argue for the inherent other-regardingness of ruling understood as a *technē* (340c5–342e11).¹⁷ But while an interpretative strategy along these lines might go some way towards explaining the passage, it seems clear that it would be much preferable if we were also able to make sense of Thrasymachus' argument as a plausible response to Socrates at this point in the discussion, rather than as the clumsy intervention of Plato's own philosophical agenda into the drama. This is all the more so given Cleitophon's immediately preceding intervention on Thrasymachus' behalf (340a1–b9). Thrasymachus' rejection of Cleitophon's seemingly attractive proposal has the effect of focusing our attention on Thrasymachus' own, alternative choice of response.¹⁸ In other words, we are led to expect that Thrasymachus will go on to suggest an equally attractive way out of the problem, not that Plato will suddenly saddle him with what looks like a highly artificial position simply for the purpose of introducing certain ideas that will become important later on in the dialogue.

I believe it is possible to develop a reading of Thrasymachus' appeal to the *technē* of ruling that avoids this problem by showing how his argument is in fact an intellectually and dramatically plausible response to Socrates' challenge at this point in the dialogue. The key, I suggest, is to realize that the position defended by Thrasymachus at this point in the discussion is one that already assumes a view of real existing political rule as exercised by experts in ruling.

is not introduced by Thrasymachus until Socrates has shown the incoherence of the latter (Klosko 1984, 14; cf. Everson 1998, 123–124).

16 Adam 1902, 32; Cross and Wooldley 1964, 46.

17 For this strategy see Adam 1902, 33; Hourani 1962, 115; Harrison 1967, 31–32 (the title of Harrison's article is 'Plato's manipulation of Thrasymachus'); Maguire 1971, 145–146; Reeve 2006, 12–13; Barney 2006, 48. I return below to Socrates' argument about the other-regarding nature of *technē*.

18 Cf. Annas 1981, 41; Slings 1999, 55.

He turns to an argument about the *technē* of ruling itself precisely in order to capture this supposed fact of contemporary political realities. However, the value of reconstructing Thrasymachus' reasoning in this way is not just that it allows us to make better sense of the dialectical details of *Republic* 1. As we shall see, on the interpretation I propose Thrasymachus' view of politics is also highly relevant as a starting point for considering the relation between democracy and political *technē* in Plato's political thought.

Real Existing Expert Rulers

Before turning to Thrasymachus' defense itself, we should make a preliminary observation concerning the relation between Thrasymachus' political sociology of justice (338d6–339a4) and Socrates' legalist paraphrase of that theory (339b9–10). Having pointed out how different political regimes legislate in their own interest (338d6–e3), Thrasymachus goes on to explain how this behaviour relates to the question of justice:

[The different political regimes] declare what they have laid down as law—what is to their advantage—to be just for the ruled, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established regime [τὸ τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς συμφέρον]. Since the established regime is surely stronger, anyone who really thinks about it will realise that the just is the same everywhere, namely, the advantage of the stronger.

Resp. 338e3–339a4; trans. GRUBE/REEVE, modified

In Thrasymachus' political sociology of justice as laid out here, the notion of “the established regime” (τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς) serves as the link between the claim that justice is the advantage of the stronger, on the one hand, and the claim that justice is obedience to the laws, on the other. Justice, he explains, is obedience to the laws laid down *by an established regime* in its own interest, and it is such an established regime (or, presumably, its members) that he refer to as ‘the stronger’.¹⁹ Now importantly, this observation shows that Thrasymachus' theory is not meant to suggest that justice is obedience to any old piece of

19 That this link is central to the theory is strongly suggested by the use of the almost exact same phrase in the parallel passage from the *Laws* (καθεστηκυία [...] πολιτεία, *Laws* 714c1–2).

legislation. The laws he has in mind are not those of an opportunistic usurper who briefly grabs hold of power and frantically rewrites the political system before he is deposed again. Thrasymachus is talking about the laws that support and benefit a stable and continuous political rule.²⁰ Note that it is, of course, not at all surprising that he limits his claim about justice to laws laid down by this kind of regime. As we have seen, Thrasymachus clearly wants to make a deflationary point about what we think of as justice, reducing it to a matter of political power. But he would not be very persuasive if he claimed that what we, as a matter of fact, think of as justice are whatever laws some momentary political authority lays down. The only laws we are likely to internalise to the degree that we come to think of them as justice (making them a proper target for the debunking cynic) would presumably be the ones that have been consistently in force, and promoted by political propaganda, for considerable time.

The reason why this element of Thrasymachus' theory has rarely been remarked upon has to do with the way Socrates goes on to paraphrase that theory in the immediately following lines. On Socrates' legalist formulation of the theory, as we saw above, justice is "to obey the rulers" (339b9–10), and by this, as the subsequent argument shows, he means to obey the laws that have been laid down by the rulers (339c4–5). Now, on the surface, this does not seem like a particularly controversial paraphrase of Thrasymachus' theory. After all, when people normally speak of 'the rulers' they will in most cases be referring to an established regime (or its members). Moreover, we should note that Socrates does not strictly speaking need to paraphrase Thrasymachus' theory in this way in order to successfully pull off his argument here. Presumably, Thrasymachus would also have had to agree that members of established regimes can make occasional mistakes in their attempt to lay down laws in their own interest (even if they do so only very rarely). So Socrates would still have been able to point out that, in those cases, to obey the laws will not be to the advantage of the stronger. But it is nonetheless important to note the subtle difference between Socrates' legalist paraphrase and the theory it is paraphrasing. By making justice a matter of obeying the laws *tout court*, Socrates is in effect ignoring a whole dimension of Thrasymachus' theory. For

20 The perfect participle *καθεστηκώς* is generally used by Plato in the sense of 'established', 'settled', 'entrenched', e.g. in *Plt.* 270d4; 271d2 (the 'established' cosmic cycle of the current era) or *Laws* 873e7 (the 'settled' state of bulks of interacting atoms). Thucydides uses the cognate term *ἀντικαθεστηκυῖα* of the traditional political system of Athens as opposed to that of Sparta (1.71.1.1). Arist. *Pol.* 1266a32 shows that the political use of the term is not simply synonymous with 'existing at the present moment'.

the rulers Thrasymachus had in mind when he spoke of obeying the laws laid down by the rulers were not just anyone who happens to wield political authority at some given time. Like anyone else they can make mistakes, of course, but their established hold on power shows that they have generally been pretty successful in not doing so.

Importantly, the same underlying vision of existing political regimes as highly competent can also be discerned when we turn to Thrasymachus' defense itself. Relying on his identification of ruling as an expertise, as we saw, Thrasymachus seeks to provide an explanation for how we should take his earlier, problematic admission that rulers can make mistakes. He was, he insists, using the term ruler in a loose sense. Failure to legislate in one's own interest is a failure to practice the *technē* of ruling, and so, strictly speaking, whoever does so is not a ruler at all. Interestingly, however, the way Thrasymachus phrases this explanation reveals something significant about how he conceives of the situation loosely referred to by him as one of rulers making mistakes.

Therefore, in the strict sense [...] no craftsman ever makes a mistake. *For it's when his expert knowledge has failed him* [ἐπιλιπούσης γὰρ ἐπιστήμης] that someone makes a mistake, and in this regard he is not a craftsman. No craftsman, expert, or ruler makes a mistake at the moment when he is ruling, even though everyone would say that a doctor or a ruler makes a mistake. It is in this loose way you should take the answer I gave just now.

Resp. 340e1–8; trans. GRUBE/REEVE, modified; my emphasis

Note the phrase in italics. It has sometimes been noted by commentators that Thrasymachus is here assuming a strikingly intellectualist understanding of technical failure. After all, it is not hard to imagine cases where doctors and mathematicians may knowingly make mistakes in the exercise of their *technē*. For instance, a doctor may deliberately bungle his treatment of a patient that happens to be his enemy, and a mathematician may be bribed into tampering with the accounts. In such cases, it does not seem right to say that technical mistakes are necessarily made due to a lack of expert knowledge.²¹ But as some of the same commentators rightly point out, Thrasymachus' intellectualist assumption begins to make much better sense once we realize that what he has in mind in these lines is first and foremost the failure to practice the *technē* of ruling specifically. Since that expertise consists precisely in legislating for the practitioner's own interest, Thrasymachus (being the cynic he is) naturally

21 Chu 2007, 66; Henderson 1970, 225.

assumes that no one will ever have any motive or desire to make mistakes in ruling. In the case of rulers, only a lack of expert knowledge can explain why someone does fail to rule.²²

However, what has rarely been noted is the implication this observation has for what Thrasymachus is saying here about real existing rulers who make mistakes (and, in so far as they do so, are not really rulers). Note that, on a closer look, what he says is not *simply* that their failure is due to a lack of expert knowledge. What he says, more precisely, is that they make mistakes "when their expert knowledge has failed them" (ἐπιλιπούσης [...] ἐπιστήμης, e3).²³ In other words, they are assumed to *possess* expert knowledge, even if that knowledge can occasionally fail them. Of course, this assumption would not be surprising in the case of the people whom we loosely refer to as doctors and mathematicians. After all, the very fact that we refer to them, however loosely, under those descriptions already suggests that they do possess some expert knowledge. But the case of rulers is significantly different. After all, we could refer loosely to someone as 'ruler' simply because he happens to wield political power at some given time, without implying anything about his competence. That is why it is crucial to observe (as we just did) that what Thrasymachus is explaining in these lines is *specifically* the case of failure to exercise the expertise of *ruling*. The real world situation that led him to make the problematic admission that rulers make mistakes, he implies, is not simply one where someone with political authority errs because he acts without expert knowledge. Rather, as we can see from his language in this passage, what he had in mind was a situation where *someone with expert knowledge of ruling* makes a mistake in the exercise of his *technē* because his expert knowledge fails him. Real existing rulers are fallible, to be sure, but they are fallible experts.

Once we appreciate that Thrasymachus entertains this view of established political regimes his reasoning in the discussion with Socrates begins to become much less puzzling. His introduction of the notion of rulers in the strict sense is not simply a gratuitous 'verbal move' designed to get him off the hook by changing the topic. To be sure, unlike real existing rulers, the infallible ruler in the strict sense is an abstraction; he does not exist anywhere in the world. But he is an abstraction that is meant to capture something significant about what Thrasymachus takes to be the facts of contemporary city-state politics: the

²² Chu 2007, 66.

²³ I modify the Grube/Reeve translation here to reflect Sling's 2003 edition of the Greek text (cf. Slings 2005, 8–9). However, nothing in my argument depends on the preference for one particular manuscript reading.

cities are governed by highly competent rulers who in a craftsmanlike way legislate for their own interest (even if they, like other experts, do occasionally make mistakes).²⁴ Against this background, it is also clear why Thrasymachus would not be attracted to Cleitophon's proposal for a modified version of his position. By making the ruler's interest relative to what the ruler himself takes to be in his interest, that proposal has the effect of bracketing the whole question of political competence and thus completely ignoring what Thrasymachus takes to be significant feature of how political rule is actually exercised. By contrast, the notion of the ruler in the strict sense allows Thrasymachus to save the consistency of his account of justice, while simultaneously insisting on his underlying view of contemporary politics. Of course, the original difficulty noted by commentators would still strictly speaking remain. If justice is now understood as obedience to the laws laid down by a hypothetical infallible expert ruler, then that account of justice is no longer equivalent to an account of what we call justice in the real world (where no such rulers exist). However, once the notion of the ruler in the strict sense is seen as a way to capture what Thrasymachus thinks are significant features of actual political rule, as I suggest, that problem does become far less pressing. After all, if actual cities are in fact governed by expert rulers, then an account of justice based on what such experts do in so far as they are experts could reasonably count as a satisfactory account of the polit-

24 It is interesting here to compare Thrasymachus' ruler in the strict sense with what the early 20th century sociologist Max Weber would later refer to as 'ideal types'. The ideal type, according to Weber, is a conceptual construction made by the social scientist in his attempt to communicate what is significant about the empirical world that confronts him. As Weber explains, when the economic historian, for instance, make statements about 'the medieval city-economy', he does not form this concept by simply construing an average of the various economic principles and practises that are in fact to be found in all those medieval cities that he is studying. Rather, the ideal type 'medieval city economy' "is obtained by means of a one-sided accentuation of one or a number of viewpoints and through the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete individual phenomena (more present in one place, fewer in another, and occasionally completely absent), which are in conformity with those one-sided, accentuated viewpoints, into a internally consistent mental image" (Weber 2012 [1904], 125). The function of such ideal types is to allow the social scientist to render intelligible, in a sharp and precise way, something significant or distinctive about social and political reality. But Weber stresses that we must not confuse the ideal type with reality itself. The ideal type "is a mental image that is not historical reality, and certainly not 'true' reality; [...] It has the status of a purely ideal limiting concept [*Grenzbegriff*] against which reality is measured—with which it is compared—in order to bring out certain significant component parts of the empirical substance of that reality" (Weber 2012 [1904], 127; German text: 1988, 194).

ical world we live in. Thus understood, the introduction of rulers in the strict sense need not undermine Thrasymachus' debunking purpose in this part of the discussion.

Note in conclusion that this reconstruction of Thrasymachus' reasoning is supported by a striking piece of textual evidence. When Socrates shortly afterwards forces Thrasymachus to defend his conception of the rulers' *technē* as inherently concerned with their own interest, Thrasymachus resorts to an analogy with the expertise of the shepherd, which, he claims, is obviously concerned with the interest of the shepherd and his master, not the sheep themselves (343b1–4).²⁵ This, Thrasymachus insists, is also how we should understand the behaviour of “the rulers in the cities, those who are truly ruling” (τοὺς ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἄρχοντας, οἱ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄρχουσιν, b4–5). How should we understand this puzzling phrase? On the one hand, his mention of “those who are truly ruling” suggests that he is making a point about the *technē* of ruling as such, and this is indeed what he and Socrates are debating at this stage of the discussion (cf. 341c5–342e11). On the other hand, his reference to “the rulers in the cities” suggests, confusingly, that he is speaking of the behaviour of real existing rulers, as opposed to rulers in the strict sense.²⁶ However, once we realize that, on Thrasymachus' view, real existing rulers are as a matter of fact experts in ruling, his wording in the phrase becomes much less problematic. Thrasymachus' notion of the ruler in the strict sense (‘the true ruler’) was meant to represent a generalization, derived from the behaviour of real existing rulers (‘the rulers in the cities’). In this sense, Thrasymachus' claim about the nature of the *technē* of ruling is indeed a claim about what rulers in the cities do.

25 I return to Socrates' argument and Thrasymachus' response below. Here I only wish to make a point about how Thrasymachus presents the position he is defending.

26 Rudebusch attempts to solve the apparent tension by arguing that Thrasymachus is not in fact making a point about the *technē* of ruling here, thus translating the phrase “the rulers in our cities—those who are actually ruling” (2007, 82; similarly in Adam 1902, 37; Cross and Woosley 1964, 48). But this is hardly the natural way of understanding ὡς ἀληθῶς here, especially since (as Rudebusch himself admits) the very same phrase is elsewhere used with clear reference to experts in the strict sense (345c2 and c3). Moreover, Socrates' remark that Thrasymachus should “change [his] ground openly, not in secret” (345b9–c1) need not be taken to imply that Thrasymachus explicitly abandoned rulers in the strict sense in 343b (as Rudebusch claims). That remark is most naturally read as Socrates' teasing way of pointing out that Thrasymachus has failed to grasp what his own notion of ‘expert in the strict sense’ implies in the case of shepherding. After all, if we follow Rudebusch's reading of 343b, Thrasymachus *would* in fact have changed his ground openly.

Democratic Expert Rule?

An important feature of the reading proposed above is that it makes Thrasymachus and his view of politics highly relevant for the question of democracy's epistemic capacities that is the theme of this book. On my reading, Thrasymachus represents the view that the established, real existing regimes in Greek cities should be understood as expert rulers who skillfully set up a political system that works in their own political interest and call obedience to the laws of this system 'justice'. Among these regimes, as we saw, he explicitly includes democracies (338d5–6). In fact, when he explains how the rulers of cities lay down laws in their own interest, his very first example is that of "a democracy that makes democratic laws" (δημοκρατία μὲν [sc. τίθεται νόμους] δημοκρατικούς, 338e2). The same is the case in the parallel passage from *Laws* 4, where the democratic regime that sets up the system in its own interest seems to be treated as the paradigmatic case of the phenomenon under consideration (*Laws* 714d1–3). Hence, prominently included in Thrasymachus' political sociology, as I interpret it, is a view of democratic regimes as a form of expert, partisan rule. No less than other forms of political rule, he suggests, perhaps even distinctly so, actual democratic regimes constitute a rule by *technē* with rulers who deserve that name in virtue of the craftsmanlike way in which they lay down laws in their own political interest.

Note that Thrasymachus' theory can thus be seen as reflecting an occupation found among other fifth century intellectuals with what was perceived as the striking, and somewhat surprising, political competence of democratic rule. Democracy might be the rule by the many, the uneducated, the morally dubious. But its intellectual observers, however critical, nonetheless had to admit (and occasionally did so) that it was, by and large, remarkably good at organizing the political system in a way that served its own interests and allowed it to remain in power. This is the main thesis of *The Constitution of the Athenians*, an anonymous fifth-century political pamphlet preserved among the writings of Xenophon. The author, conventionally if somewhat misleadingly referred to as the Old Oligarch, states from the very beginning of the tract that he does not approve of the democratic *politeia* in Athens which, as he puts it in the characteristic language of class prejudice, is a rule by the "worthless" many rather than—and at the expense of—the "useful" few ([Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.1).²⁷

27 On the sobriquet 'Old Oligarch' see Marr and Rhodes (2008), who point out (a) that the author is probably not very old (unless that word is taken to suggest "extremity of

But while thus finding the political system objectionable, he openly recognises that Athenian democracy is in fact highly successful in serving its intended purpose, namely to preserve the political freedom and hegemony of the *dēmos*, that is, the lower classes (1.1; 3.1). The tract consists in an extended analysis of a number of democratic institutions and practices that are often criticised by others as bad or misguided, but which are in fact, so the author argues, essential to maintaining popular control.²⁸ For instance, the lack of requirements for office-holding and the equality of speech (*isēgoria*) are explained as efficient means for preventing the formation of a strong opposition to the popular regime (1.2–7); the lenient treatment of slaves and metics in Athens is rationalised as providing the necessary economic basis for maintaining the naval power of the city (1.11–12); and public deliberation in the assembly is shown to give the city more room for manoeuvring by diluting responsibility for decisions and agreements (2.17). As the author concludes, with equal amounts of resignation and admiration, it is very hard to see how power can ever be wrested from the hands of the lower classes, given how elegantly the system is set up to prevent the formation of a strong anti-democratic opposition (3.12).²⁹ Importantly for our purposes, this general view of the Athenian political system leads the author to display a conspicuous and telling ambiguity concerning the epistemic qualities of the democratic regime he is analysing. On the one hand, he straightforwardly adopts and repeats the ideological clichés about the *dēmos* that were prevalent among his own social class: the lower classes are ignorant (cf. ἀμαθία, 1.5; 1.7) and uneducated (ἀπαιδευσία, 1.5). He even at one point refers to the common people as “mad” or “savage” (μαινόμενους, 1.9). But on the other hand he acknowledges that the entire democratic *politeia* is clearly an intelligent and carefully designed system: throughout the tract he repeatedly points out how this or that aspect of the system is the result of “judgment” or “deliberation” (γνώμη) on the part of the *dēmos* (1.11) or explains that the people “know” (γινώσκει) that this or that practice will serve their own interest best (1.3; cf.

viewpoint” rather than age), and (b) that his position, though anti-democratic, is not that of a conventional oligarch (1–2; 15). On (upper)class prejudice and its terminology: Marr and Rhodes 2008, 19–21; 24–26.

28 On this argument in general: Ober 1998, 18–20; Gray 2007, 50–51; Marr and Rhodes 2008, 16–18.

29 “The elite author of [the tract] leads his newly enlightened elite reader smack into a brick wall and abandons him there” (Ober 1998, 25). A similar analysis of democracy and democratic politics seems to have formed the basis for the digression on fifth century Athens in the tenth book of the work *Philippica* by the fourth century historian Theopompus of Chios: Connor 1968, 71.

1.7; 1.14; 2.9).³⁰ To be sure, unlike Thrasymachus (on my reading), the author of *The Constitution of the Athenians* never describes this shrewd demotic ‘judgment’ as the exercise of a special *technē* of ruling. But he certainly takes a big step in that direction, and it is clear that he and Thrasymachus share the same basic view of a democracy like that of Athens as uncannily good at what it does.³¹

Of course, it should be stressed that Thrasymachus does not focus specifically on the question of democracy in Book 1 of the *Republic*. But the subsequent discussion between him and Socrates nonetheless has implications for what we take democracy’s epistemic potential to be. For Plato has Socrates immediately challenge Thrasymachus’ general portrayal of existing political regimes, including democracy, as expert rulers whose expertise allows them to skillfully legislate in their own factional interest. Socrates’ argument (341e5–342e11; 345b8–347a5) turns on an analysis of the notion of *technē* itself. Using the examples of medicine and seafaring, he argues that every *technē* has its own specific subject-matter (the body; the sailors and the ship) and that it is “by nature set over [this subject matter] to seek and provide what is to its advantage” (341d8–9). Of course, a doctor and a steersman might practice their respective expertises for all sorts of self-interested reasons. But in so far as they are what we call them, i.e. doctors and steersmen, they aim at the advantage of the body or the safety of the ship and its crew (341d2–4; 342d4–e5). Socrates insists that the same goes for every other kind of *technē*, including the art of ruling: an expert ruler, in so far as we call him that, is concerned with the advantage of the ruled, not himself (342e7–11; 346e3–7). Whatever benefits an expert ruler might derive from his ruling will be strictly incidental to the exercise of his expertise as such (345e5–346e7). Thrasymachus is thus faced with an inconvenient prospect: his ruler in the strict sense turns out to be an expert in promoting the interests of his subjects, not himself.

30 Cf. Gray 2007, 51 (with note 6); Marr and Rhodes 2008, 70; 172–173 (appendix 5). Contrast here the traditional aristocratic view, represented in Herodotus’ ‘constitutional debate’ by Megabyzus, that unlike a tyrant who, if nothing else, at least acts with deliberation the *dēmos* “does not even have deliberation in it” (τῷ δὲ οὐδὲ γινώσκειν ἐνι, 3.81.2; cf. Gray 2007, 50).

31 It is common in the literature to compare Thrasymachus (in the *Republic*) with the author of *The Constitution of the Athenians* (e.g. Frisch 1942, 114; Maguire 1971, 144; Marr and Rhodes 2008, 17). But what commentators have not previously appreciated is that the two positions agree not just about the inherent self-interest of partisan political regimes (like democracy), but also in their assessment of how *good* such regimes in fact are at promoting that self-interest.

Now, as I have already mentioned, Thrasymachus does attempt a bit of pushback in the face of this argument (343b1–c1).³² After all, Socrates relies on a generalisation from such ‘service-providing’ expertises as medicine and sea-faring. But what about the expertise of the shepherd? Surely shepherds exercise their *technē* with an eye to “their master’s good and their own”, not that of the sheep (343b1–4). The same, Thrasymachus claims, is true of the expertise exercised by expert rulers (b4–c1). Socrates, however, stubbornly insists that, on the contrary, his earlier point about the other-regarding nature of *technē* holds in this case too. The shepherd, in so far as he is a shepherd, looks to what is best for the sheep, not “to a banquet, like a guest about to be entertained at a feast, or a future sale, like a money-maker rather than a shepherd” (345c6–d1). It has often been remarked that Socrates is not terribly convincing here.³³ One might, for instance, wonder what he would have replied if Thrasymachus had instead confronted him with the art of rearing *foie gras* geese. But Socrates’ insistent claim about *technē* is nonetheless allowed to stand unchallenged. For at this point in the dialogue (347d8–e3), without giving his interlocutor a chance to pursue the argument any further, Socrates simply breaks off their discussion of Thrasymachus’ political account of justice (‘the advantage of the stronger’) and turns instead to his new, moral account (‘another’s good’; already introduced at 343c1–4). As we saw, this is the account that is later taken up by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book 2 and thus sets the stage for the rest of the *Republic*. Thrasymachus’ political account, by contrast, with its view of political regimes as experts in ruling for their own advantage, has made its one and only appearance in the dialogue.

Towards an Epistemic Analysis of Democracy

Thrasymachus’ political account of justice in *Republic* 1 is important for our purposes in this book because it raises, if only implicitly, the possibility of something like democratic expert rule. It shows Plato’s awareness that not

32 Socrates already mentions resistance on Thrasymachus’ part in 342d3–4 but does not specify what it consists in.

33 Cross and Woollsey 1964, 48–50; Henderson 1970, 224–227; Klosko 1984, 25; Barney 2006, 50–51. Cf. Annas 1981, 49. Barney also rightly points to the problem of Socrates’ own later reference to an art of ‘wage-earning’ (μισθωτική) in 346b1. For if this is indeed a *technē* on the model just laid out then “it would have to somehow, mysteriously, benefit the wages themselves” (2006, 52). However, Socrates’ argument is not simply plucked from the air. Similar ideas can be found in the Hippocratic treatises: Heinimann 1961, 199–120.

everyone would simply assume, with the Socratic argument, that a rule by the people is incompatible with rule by *technē*. In the *Republic* itself, however, Plato does not take the opportunity to make the question of democracy's epistemic potential an object of systematic investigation in its own right. To be sure, the remainder of the dialogue has plenty to say about the intellectual capacities of ordinary people. But what it says is not based on any independent exploration of what epistemic resources a rule by the people might be able to muster. Rather, the epistemic qualities ascribed to the *dēmos* are derived simply from negative contrast with those ascribed to the enlightened philosophers. The ship-owner in the ship of state image is "hard of hearing, and a bit short-sighted" (488b1), in contrast with the true expert in sea-faring who studiously observes "the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds and all that pertains to his craft" (d5–8). The *dēmos* is like "a huge, strong beast" (493a10), the paradigm of irrationality, whereas the educated elite of guardians is treated as the representatives of wisdom itself (428b1–429a3). This pattern is perhaps most clearly seen in Socrates' well-known image of the cave (514a–517c). The beliefs of the prisoners in the cave, who seem intended to represent both ordinary people generally and the Athenian *dēmos* specifically, are concerned merely with the shadows cast by models of those real things that an enlightened philosopher will perceive once he is freed from his chains and has ascended to wisdom.³⁴ The intellectual state of the people at large is conceptualised simply (and literally) as the mirror image of the philosopher's: all they have is simply a distorted and insubstantial reflection of what he has.

However, the same image of the cave does also contain what I believe is the *Republic's* only hint at what could, in theory, serve as the basis for a more constructive exploration of democracy's epistemic potential. At one point, Socrates pauses to consider what the enlightened ex-prisoner would think of "his first dwelling place, his fellow-prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there" (τῆς ἐκεῖ σοφίας, 516c5).

If there had been any honours, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which

34 That the prisoners represent ordinary people is suggested by Socrates' remark that "they're like us" (515a5) and by his suggestion that the story of the ex-prisoner "shows that the power of learning is present in everyone's soul" (518c4–5). That the prisoners are also meant to recall the Athenian *dēmos* is suggested by their wish to kill the returning philosopher who tries to free them from their intellectual bondage (517a4–6) and perhaps also by the reference to law courts (517d7–8).

simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honoured and held power?

Resp. 516c8–d4; trans. GRUBE/REEVE

As the reference to prizes, honours, and power makes clear, the account of this competitive activity among the prisoners is first and foremost intended to explain how certain of them come to achieve distinction *vis-à-vis* their peers in the cave. But since what is described is clearly a common activity for all the prisoners (516e6–7), it is very tempting to take it also as a more general account of the process of belief formation among ordinary people.³⁵ What comes to count as authoritative ‘wisdom’ among the prisoners in the cave are those beliefs that can, on the basis of past experience, best predict the future. Interestingly, what this reading would imply is that the beliefs of ordinary people are the result of at least some minimal intellectual effort. The prisoners’ epistemic state is inextricably bound up with the shadows on the cave wall, but it consists not simply in a cognitive imprint or passive reproduction of those shadows. Rather, people’s beliefs about the shadow world they live in are the intellectual product of their experience-based attempt to make sense of the phenomena that confront them.

In the *Republic*, Socrates’ description of this crude empiricism does not amount to any kind of recommendation of popular beliefs. If anything, the prisoners in the cave are positively ridiculed for the seriousness and energy with which they approach what is really nothing but “fighting over shadows” (517d8–9). But the operative notion of ‘experience’, understood as the practice-oriented, cumulative product of past observations, does provide a way forward that Plato will investigate more fully in other dialogues. Firstly, as we shall see in the next chapter, the notion of experience is exactly what he latches onto in his epistemic account of democracy in the *Gorgias*. When Socrates claims, in that dialogue, that rhetoric is not a *technē*, he is not only basing that claim on a theory about what a genuine *technē* should aim at. As we shall see, he is also basing it on an analysis of the epistemic potential of democratic politics itself. What he argues is that a democratic system, being forced to conduct its political deliberation through the medium of public speaking, is inherently unable to pursue its own political goals in a truly scientific manner. The best it can do is

35 This reading is also supported by 516d7, where participation in the competitive activity among the prisoners is paraphrased as simply “believing what they believe and living as they do [‘κεῖνά τε δοξάζειν καὶ ἐκείνως ζῆν]”.

to rely on mere 'experience', *empeiria*. In the *Gorgias*, this is still not meant to suggest that democracy is to any significant extent intellectually competent. But as we shall see in Chapter Three, the late dialogue *Statesman* takes up the idea of experience yet again and places it at the centre of a strikingly sympathetic account of a specific kind of democratic rule.

Scientific Politics and the Power of the People: Rhetoric and *technē* in the *Gorgias*

The *Gorgias* might seem even less promising than the *Republic* as the place to begin an investigation of Plato's discussions of the best case that can be made for democracy as an epistemically justified form of political rule. After all, this is perhaps the most uncompromisingly antidemocratic of Plato's works and the one most explicitly and unswervingly critical of his native Athens. The fate of Plato's mentor at the hands of the Athenian *dēmos* is the unmistakable backdrop of the entire discussion, and Socrates' repeated insistence that he has nothing to say to the Athenian public leaves the impression of popular rule as a lost cause, as dangerous as it is incurable.¹ Even the most attentive reader of the dialogue will have a hard time finding the slightest hint that any kind of case, however flawed and tentative, might be made for the Athenian system of government. The *Gorgias* reads like a bitter *J'accuse*, rather than as the curious and nuanced reflections of a Tocqueville.

But the *Gorgias* is nonetheless important for our purposes because it represents a significant advance beyond the Socratic approach to the question of democracy's epistemic status that dominates the discussions of popular rule in the early dialogues and in the *Republic*. For in the *Gorgias*, rather than simply contrasting democracy with rule by *technē*, Socrates is made to positively address the question of its own epistemic foundations. How should we characterize democratic politics from an epistemic point of view? What are the principles that guide it and how do they stand up in comparison with the principle of rule by *technē*? In the *Gorgias*, Socrates' purpose in raising this question is strictly critical: his aim is to reject democratic politics as unscientific, not to seriously consider its claim to scientific status. But the understanding of democracy's epistemic foundation presented in the dialogue is one that Plato would later be ready to take up for renewed consideration and develop into a more constructive conception of how popular rule, or at least some form of popular rule, might hold the promise of a significant epistemic potential.

1 On the allegedly uncompromising attitude of the *Gorgias* and its role in Plato's work: e.g. Dodds 1959, 30–34; Barker 1918, 134n1; 143. Guthrie 1975, 295–296; Yunis 1996, 157–158; Ober 1998, 207–213.

Why is Rhetoric not Scientific?

A central part of Socrates' criticism of rhetoric, or 'public speaking' (*rhētorikē*), in the *Gorgias* is his denial that it qualifies as a *technē*, a scientific skill or craft, and the corresponding claim that it is merely what he calls *empeiria*, a matter of mere "experience" (*Gorg.* 462b8–c3). As the discussion makes clear, he does not mean by this merely the *ad hominem* claim that the practitioners of rhetoric among his contemporaries simply happen to be exercising their skill in an unscientific way, nor does he mean to suggest that the historical development of rhetoric simply has not proceeded far enough for us to rightly call it a proper *technē* (although we might some day do so). Rather, what he claims is that rhetoric—or, at least, what his contemporaries would recognize as rhetoric—can, as a matter of principle, *never* be put on a genuine scientific footing.² For throughout the dialogue, Socrates links the degradation of rhetoric to the status of *empeiria* closely with his characterization of it as naturally belonging in the category of pleasure-oriented *kolakeia* (translatable as either "flattery" or "ingratiation"³) alongside cookery and cosmetics, as opposed to an activity that aims at the good (464c3–d3). In response to Polus' impatient desire to know what Socrates himself thinks about rhetoric, the philosopher brings together these two claims about rhetoric:

I call it *kolakeia*, and I say that such a thing is shameful, Polus [...] because it guesses at what is pleasant, without what is best. I say that it is not a scientific skill, but merely a matter of experience, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them, so that it's unable to state the cause of each thing. And I refuse to call anything that is without such an account a scientific skill.

Gorg. 464e2–465a6; trans. ZEYL, modified

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- 2 The qualification here is important: in the course of the dialogue Socrates does hint at the possibility of "a scientific and good rhetor" (504d5–7) and later portrays himself as such (521d6–8). But it is clear that this is not meant to suggest that rhetoric, as contemporary Athenians knew it, might be made scientific. Socrates is rather proposing a *rival* conception of what rhetoric might be: Socratic dialogue conducted on a one-on-one basis. "In the *Gorgias*", Yunis writes, "Socrates does not characterize his private dialectical discourse as an alternative, truer form of political discourse. He opposes his dialectical discourse to political discourse" (1996, 160).
 - 3 I will leave *kolakeia* untranslated for now, since, as we shall see, the choice of translation has important interpretative implications for how we understand Socrates' claim.

The passage brings home how intimately connected Socrates takes his two claims about rhetoric to be. Rhetoric, he says, proceeds by “guessing”, rather than by relying on an account of the “nature” and “cause” of what it is concerned with.⁴ This notion of mere ‘guesswork’ as a feature of *empeiria*, as opposed to the “knowing” that is distinctive of a scientific approach, has already come up a few lines before (464c6). Socrates’ characterization of rhetoric as “guessing at what is pleasant, without what is best” (465a2), in other words, serves to present his denial of scientific procedure to rhetoric as closely linked with his claim that it aims at pleasure, rather than the good.

In one way, of course, Socrates’ denial of *technē* status to a merely pleasure-oriented activity like rhetoric makes perfect sense. On the conventional Greek understanding, an important part of what it was to be a *technē* was to be somehow beneficial or to bring about something of benefit. In fact, the existence of traditional *technai* among human beings—medicine, weaving, seafaring—were often explained by reference to the way they each serve to produce good and useful results.⁵ This common understanding also informs several passages in the *Gorgias*, where good-orientation as such is closely associated with being a *technē* or the practitioner of a *technē* (503c7–d2; 503e4–504a1; 504d5–e4).⁶ But this is clearly not all there is to Socrates’ denial of *technē* status to rhetoric. His denial amounts to more than simply another way of saying that rhetoric is morally problematic. As we saw, Socrates also points to its inability to provide a systematic explanatory account of its procedure, and he suggests a connection

4 There is some uncertainty about the text in 465a4 (cf. Dodds 1959, 229–230; Irwin 1979, 135). As it stands, the text seems to refer to an account of the nature of *what brings about* the end (i.e. the means to pleasure). But Socrates’ later recapitulation in 501a1–3 suggests that what he has in mind is first and foremost an account of the nature (and cause) of the *aim* of rhetoric (i.e. pleasure). However, the two passages are not necessarily in contradiction. Knowing the nature of what brings about x could arguably imply both (a) knowing the cause of x and (b) knowing the nature of x itself.

5 Cf. Heinimann 1961, 177–120; Woolf 2004, 119–120. As Woolf rightly notes, this does not mean that *technai* cannot be misused for bad ends (as when a doctor uses his expertise to kill people), “[b]ut the fact that we speak of *misuse* in these cases shows that we think of correct use in terms of the proprietary benefit of a given activity” (120).

6 Interestingly, in a later dialogue, the *Sophist*, Plato seems to no longer see this as a necessary condition for *technē*. For while clearly not aimed at the good, the sophist’s skill in imitative deception is nonetheless assumed to be a *technē* (*Soph.* 221d). However, Plato also hints that this identification may not be entirely unproblematic: it is Theaetetus who asserts that the sophist is “not a layman” (d3); and the Eleatic Stranger qualifies his own affirmation of this point with a “as it seems” (ὥς ἔοικε, d5). I owe this last observation to Brill’s anonymous reviewer.

between this inability and the fact that rhetoric is a species of pleasure-oriented *kolakeia*. There are, in other words, two separate conditions for being a *technē*: the activity must be one that naturally aims at the good for human beings, and it must proceed in a certain fashion, namely, in accordance with the nature and cause of its subject matter. Socrates seems to claim that rhetoric's status as a pleasure-oriented activity is somehow relevant for understanding its failure on *both* counts.

But how should we conceive of the connection between (1) aiming at pleasure and (2) the inability to proceed in a scientific manner? On the face of it, there seems to be no necessary connection. Presumably we could agree with the Socratic anti-hedonist assumption that pleasure is not the good, while denying that that agreement has any bearing on whether someone could have scientific expertise in bringing about pleasure. Why should not a pleasure-producing activity, like rhetoric, allow of the kind of scientific underpinning in terms of causal explanation that, according to Socrates, is one of the requirements for raising something from mere guesswork to a genuine *technē*? This question becomes all the more pressing when we bear in mind the other, more well-known pleasure-oriented activities with which Socrates compares rhetoric. It may of course be the case that *as a matter of fact* many cooks simply proceed on the basis of what has proven tasty in the past, without reflecting scientifically on the causes of pleasant taste. But what is to hinder *as a matter of principle* the exercise of something like cookery from being able to rise to the level of genuine *technē* procedure by means of a systematic grasp of what produces tasty dishes? While Socrates' moral criticism of rhetoric as pleasure-oriented *kolakeia* is intelligible, there seems, as Raphael Woolf puts it, to be something strikingly "gratuitous" about his denial to it of scientific method (2004, 121). What, we may legitimately wonder, is so wrong with the notion of a 'science of pleasure'?

The traditional answer to this question, in so far as there is one, has consisted in pointing to what is taken to be fundamental Platonic assumptions about pleasure as an object of scientific knowledge. The guiding idea, here, seems to be that pleasure is in some way rationally indeterminable and thus unsusceptible to scientific explanation. Drawing on the late dialogue, the *Philebus*, David Roochnik helpfully sums up how this line of argument can and has been pursued:

Assume (as Socrates does at *Phil.* 27e) that pleasure is inherently indeterminate. This might be true in two senses. First, people experience pleasure in an indefinite and unpredictable variety of ways; second, pleasure and pain form a continuum that always admits of the "more and the less"

(*Phil.* 24a). Pleasure thus offers no fixed, stable, and epistemically reliable standard at which to aim. Assume further that *technē* is a rigorous form of knowledge with a determinate subject matter. If so, there can be no *technē* of or aiming for pleasure, and if rhetoric indeed aims to produce pleasure, it cannot be a *technē*.

ROOCHNIK 1996, 186

While it might be tempting to follow Dodds, Irwin and others in seeking an explanation to Socrates' claim about rhetoric in *Gorgias* along these lines,⁷ it is worth noting that it is not an explanation that is evidenced by the text itself. None of its proponents, tellingly, are able to point to passages in the dialogue for support. So we are invited to believe that one of Socrates' major arguments in the dialogue is premised on a view of pleasure that he never feels the need to make explicit. But this is not all. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates in fact strongly suggests that the reason for rhetoric's lack of a scientific explanatory underpinning is *not* to be sought in the unsuitability of pleasure to the kind of procedure that characterizes a *technē*. An activity like rhetoric, he says in a later recapitulation, "proceeds toward [pleasure] in a quite uncraftlike way, *without at all investigating the nature of pleasure, nor its cause*" (οὔτε τι τὴν φύσιν σχεψαμένη τῆς ἡδονῆς οὔτε τὴν αἰτίαν, 501a4–6). Socrates does not here say that rhetoric fails to proceed scientifically because an investigation into the nature and cause of pleasure is in principle impossible, or because pleasure does not *have* a nature or cause to be investigated in the first place. Rather, Socrates clearly implies that pleasure *does* have a nature and cause that could, hypothetically, be the object of investigation. When rhetoric, as a pleasure-oriented activity, cannot give a scientific account of its procedures and thus fails to proceed as a *technē*, it is because it, for some reason, neglects such investigation. Contrary to the common view, it is not because a scientific investigation into pleasure is simply ruled out as a matter of principle.

The importance of the passage in 501a is noted by Raphael Woolf, who, accordingly, sees the need for an alternative explanation of Socrates' puzzling denial of *technē* procedure to pleasure-oriented activities, like rhetoric. The solution, he suggests, should be sought in the way rhetoric presents itself to its audience. As Woolf rightly points out, Socrates goes to great length to explain how rhetoric, as a pleasure-oriented activity, should be understood as the "insubstantial image of a part of politics" (463d2)—the part Socrates

7 Dodds 1959, 10; 228–229. Irwin 1979, 9–10; Gosling 1975, 153; Sharples 1994, 49–50; Yunis 1996, 124–125.

calls “justice” (465c3)—and that it “makes itself out to be what it impersonates” (464c7–d1). The difference between original and imitation, here, is that between aiming at the good (as justice does) and merely aiming at pleasure (as rhetoric does). This means that, in order to make itself out to be justice, rhetoric must pretend that what it produces *is* the good, although it is in reality only pleasure. This act of pretense on the part of rhetoric is, according to Woolf, the key to understanding why Socrates denies it the capacity to proceed scientifically.

The key is to recognize that for Socrates rhetoric and its good-oriented counterpart (justice) operate on the same territory. They are *competitors*. Rhetoric *pretends* to be good-oriented. So it is as a pretender to this title that it should be judged. And it is in this regard that it falls short. As a purveyor of pleasure it might in principle be able to offer an adequate account of how its effects are achieved. As we have already seen, Socrates implies that pleasure may indeed have its own nature and cause. But as a pretender to deliver good it can offer no such explanation.

WOOLF 2004, 124–125; WOOLF’s emphasis

By making itself out to be a good-oriented activity, in other words, rhetoric also makes itself subject to those standards of scientific explanation that apply to *actual* good-oriented activities. It will be assessed on its ability to give an account of the nature and cause *of the good*, rather than the pleasant. Rhetoric’s inevitable failure to be scientific thus stems from the mismatch between what it is really about, pleasure, and what it claims to be about and is judged as being about, the good.

Woolf is right to point to rhetoric’s role of pretender as important to Socrates’ critical argument. But his observation cannot be made to do the explanatory work he wants it to do. On the interpretation he offers, what leads Socrates to deny that rhetoric can be scientific is its incapacity for explanation of the nature and cause *of the good*, which is what it is pretending to bring about. But, as Woolf himself seems to half-concede, that is *not* how Socrates in fact speaks about rhetoric and its lack of *technē* status. As we saw in the above passage, the result of rhetoric’s incapacity for scientific explanation is that it merely “guesses at what is pleasant, without what is best” (465a1–2). Given Socrates’ association of such ‘guesswork’ with *empeiria* (463a6–b4; 464c6), this passage plainly makes the lack of scientific procedure a property of rhetoric’s relation to *pleasure*, not to the good. Rhetoric cannot be a *technē* because it merely guesses *at pleasure*. Woolf sees this and attempts to avoid its implication by suggesting that we read the passage as a “loose” way of expressing the idea

that rhetoric by “pretending to the good but operating as it does by aiming at the ‘the pleasant without the best’ [...] is indeed a matter of guesswork” (2004, 127). But this is hardly the most natural way of taking Socrates’ point, here, and that should make us cautious about adopting Woolf’s interpretation. This is indeed all the more so since a later passage, which recapitulates the distinction between good-oriented and pleasure-oriented activities, reiterates Socrates’ insistence that the problem stems from rhetoric’s relation to what it actually aims at (pleasure), not to what it pretends to aim at (the good).

I said, I believe, that cookery doesn’t seem to be a *technē*, but *empeiria*, while medicine is a *technē*. I said that medicine has investigated the nature of what it is concerned with and the cause of what it does, and it is able to give an account of each of these. But the other is about pleasure, which is what it is wholly concerned with, and it proceeds toward pleasure in a quite uncraftlike way [ἀτέχνως], without at all investigating the nature of pleasure, nor its cause, and altogether without reasoning, making practically no distinctions. By habit and experience it keeps only the memory of what usually happens, by which it provides its pleasures.⁸

Gorg. 500e4–501b1

This passage confirms the impression made in Socrates’ earlier reference to pleasure-oriented activities as unscientifically “guessing at what is pleasant”. It is in their approach *to pleasure* (ἐπ’ αὐτὴν ἔρχεται, a4–5) that such activities, rhetoric among them, fail to qualify as *technai*. An unscientific reliance on mere habit and accumulated experience, rather than an investigation into causes, is the means “by which they bring about pleasures” (ᾧ δὴ καὶ πορίζεται τὰς ἡδονάς, b1). We can hardly put this down as yet another “loose” way of making the very different point that it is *as a good-oriented* activity that something like rhetoric is judged to be unscientific. Unless we want to saddle Socrates with an utterly confused position on the question, we must, it seems, accept that it is as a pleasure-oriented activity that rhetoric is, on his view, denied the capacity for genuine *technē* procedure.

So we are back at the original puzzle: why does Socrates claim that pleasure-oriented activities, like rhetoric, fail to qualify as *technai* in their procedure? Previous proposals for a solution turned on what was assumed to be the underlying assumption about pleasure as an object of scientific investigation, or on the mismatch between what rhetoric does and what it pretends to do. But as we

8 For the grammatical construction of the last part of this passage see Dodds 1959, 319–320.

have seen neither of these solutions fits well with what Socrates actually says in the *Gorgias*. I will suggest that the reason why scholars have had a hard time making satisfactory sense of Socrates' claim is that they have failed to appreciate how closely it is connected to the argument and purpose of the dialogue as a whole. My strategy is to argue that the character of the relation between (1) pleasure-orientation and (2) lack of proper *technē* procedure is different from what is usually assumed. The relation between these two features of rhetoric is not a *causal* relation. It is not that rhetoric is not scientific simply *because* it aims at pleasure. Rather, the relation between (1) and (2) is what we might call a *common cause relation*. The key to this solution lies in the diagnosis of democratic politics that Socrates famously undertakes in his discussion with Callicles. My claim is that both (1) and (2) are explained by reference to the conditions for public speech in democratic Athens. The political and ideological dominance of the *dēmos* over public speakers has implications both for *what* rhetoric aims at and for *how* it is able to pursue that aim. Once we place Socrates' criticism of rhetoric's scientific credentials in this context it will also be clear why that criticism is of great importance to him. It is not merely a jab at professional teachers in rhetoric, like Gorgias and Polus, who are told that they do not really teach a genuine *technē* after all. Rather it comes to the fore as a key tool in Socrates' attempt to philosophically undermine the political regime characteristic of his native Athens.

Who Rules Who?

It is helpful, I want to suggest, to begin with the other claim Socrates makes about rhetoric. Why does he hold that rhetoric is necessarily an activity aimed at pleasure, rather than the good? After all, the very first example Gorgias gives of rhetoric at work does not present it as a pleasure-oriented activity, quite the contrary.

I have often, along with my brother and with other doctors, visited one of their patients who refused to drink his medicine or subject to the doctor's cutting and burning, and when the doctor had been unable to persuade them, I persuaded them, by means of no other *technē* than rhetoric.

Gorg. 456b1–5; trans. WOODHEAD in HAMILTON and CAIRNS 1966, modified

In this example, Gorgias' ability to speak more persuasively than a doctor about medical treatment is not exercised for the sake of merely pleasing the 'audience', i.e. the patient. Rather, it is exercised in order to help the patient

get *better* by persuading him to submit to the required treatment. In fact, the example explicitly portrays the exercise of rhetoric as aimed at the good *in contrast with* what is merely pleasant. The rhetor persuades his audience to do something that is unpleasant (drinking bitter medicine, submitting to surgery) for the sake of what is good (health). In short, this seems to be a clear-cut example of rhetoric exercised as a good-oriented activity.

But the rhetoric Socrates is talking about is a more complex phenomenon than that of Gorgias' example. Among Plato's dialogues, the *Gorgias* is the one most directly, and most profoundly, occupied with the question of political power, and, as W.K.C. Guthrie rightly points out, this is wholly appropriate for a dialogue that is presented as an investigation of rhetoric. For "[t]he fact is, of course, that in Plato's Greece rhetoric itself was a tremendous moral and political force, and to treat it in isolation would never occur to a Greek and would involve a quite illegitimate separation of form from content" (1975, 298). Indeed, one of the most striking and interesting arguments in the dialogue is Socrates' attempt to turn upside down the conventional view of both the dynamics of democratic politics and of rhetoric's role in it.⁹ Rhetoric's use of persuasive speech, Gorgias proudly proclaims, makes its practitioner able to wield great power over his audience. In the *Encomium of Helen*, the historical Gorgias had famously declared that "speech is a powerful ruler" (λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, DK 82 B11, 8), and in the *Gorgias* itself Plato has him praise rhetoric as the source of "rule of others in one's own city" (τοῦ ἄλλων ἄρχειν ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ πόλει ἐκάστω, 452d6–7). This assumed connection between rhetoric and power, then, sets the tone for the subsequent discussion when it is taken up by Polus and Callicles. Polus offers as the value of the rhetorical skills taught by Gorgias and himself that they make the practitioner like a tyrant, able to do whatever he wants with impunity (466b11–c2). The rhetors, he assumes, are "the most powerful in the cities" (466b4–5). Likewise, what makes Gorgias' teachings attractive to a young ambitious man like Callicles is the promise of power and success in Athenian political life for someone who masters public speaking (485d; 515a).

Socrates, famously, argues that this conception of rhetoric as an instrument of power for its practitioner is based on an illusion. The 'many', who constitute the rhetor's audience in the assembly or in law courts, are not simply a passive mass to be molded and manipulated by its strong leaders. Rather, as Socrates argues against Callicles, it is the many who are the stronger party, stronger than any single person could ever be (488b–489b). This asymmetry of power shapes

9 Cf. Ober 1998, 190–213; Schofield 2006, 63–68.

and pervades democratic politics. Callicles, so Socrates teases the young man, has two objects of love, both conveniently named ‘demos’. He loves the boy Demos, the son of Pyrilampes, but, as someone engaged in Athenian politics, he is also the lover of the Athenian *dēmos* (481d1–5).

I notice that in each case you’re unable to contradict your beloved, clever though you are, no matter what he says or what he claims is so. You keep shifting back and forth. If you say anything in the assembly and the Athenian *dēmos* denies it, you shift your ground and say what it wants to hear.

Gorg. 481d5–e3; trans. ZEYL

By means of this erotic metaphor Socrates indicates that the power relation between rhetor and *dēmos* is the opposite of what Callicles assumed. “The politician in a democracy is in the position of a suitor [...] in relation to the Sovereign People” (Dodds 1959, 262).¹⁰ He is unable to oppose what his beloved says and changes position in accordance with what the latter wants. In this way, the supposedly powerful *rhetores* of Athens are revealed as occupying a strictly subservient role. They are nothing more than a “servant of the city” who gives the Athenian *dēmos* what it wants, no questions asked. What distinguishes a competent rhetor from one who is less so is merely the ability to better cater for the master (517b–c).

As if to counter the possible objection that a rhetor could successfully manipulate the people for his own ends by merely faking subservience, Socrates goes on to insist that the dominance of *dēmos* over *rhetor* must extend even to the level of basic values and outlook. To be successful under a given political regime, Socrates argues, one needs to become friendly with the ruler, and this in turn requires genuinely learning to “approve and disapprove of the same things” (510c8). This is no less the case when the ruler in question is the Athenian *dēmos* itself:

If you think that someone is going to teach you some ‘expertise’ which will make you a great power in this city, but yet stay unassimilated—whether for better or worse—to its political character, then in my view,

10 The image of the power-hungry rhetor as a ‘lover’ of the *demos* was a well-known trope. In Aristophanes’ *Knights*, both Paphlagon and the sausage-seller present themselves as lovers of Demos (729–740); and Socrates also uses the image in the *First Alcibiades* to warn the young Alcibiades of what he might become—a *δημεραστής*—if he chooses to pursue a career in Athenian politics (*Alc.* 1 132a3). Cf. Yunis 1996, 191.

Callicles, you're kidding yourselves. It's not just a question of imitating these people. You have to be like them in your very nature, if you are to make any real progress towards friendship with the Athenian *dēmos* [...] That's why it's the person who will make you most like these people, it's that person who will make you into a political leader and speaker in the way you want to be a political leader. All groups of people take pleasure in speeches suited to their own character, and are offended by speeches made in one that isn't theirs.

Gorg. 513a7–c2; trans. SCHOFIELD 2006, modified

The domination of the people over their supposed 'leaders', then, goes all the way down. Callicles, if he really wants to be a successful rhetor, will be forced to assimilate himself to the values and goals of the very people he hoped to rule.¹¹ As Josiah Ober puts it, the *Gorgias* in this way "exposes the reality that lies at the heart of the democracy: that in Athens, the *dēmos* really does rule. It reveals that the instrument of demotic rule is an ideological hegemony over each citizen, and especially over would-be leaders" (1998, 190).¹² On Socrates' view, rhetoric's status as a pleasure-oriented activity is simply a function of its role in this framework of demotic dominance. What the people desire is *pleasure*, Socrates assumes, and it is the people who call the shots. Far from being an instrument of power to be wielded for whatever ends the rhetor sees fit, rhetoric has its aim dictated to it by the audience. The notion that it can ever be, as Gorgias suggested, simply an instrument of "rule over others" is revealed as confused and delusional when we understand that democratic politics really is *the rule of the people* and not something else. Rhetoric must give the people what they want: pleasure.

All this is well known. But it is nonetheless necessary to bring it out here with full clarity, for it shows us something important about the underlying assumptions that guide Socrates' discussion of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. Socrates is only able to claim that rhetoric must belong in the genus of pleasure-oriented activities because he assumes that it is an inherently democratic phenomenon. Rhetoric's implication in the power relation of democratic politics, he assumes,

11 Callicles is himself fully aware of the force of democratic ideology over the elite in Athens (483e–484a). But he is wrong, Socrates argues, in thinking that he, as a political leader, would be strong enough to resist that force. Cf. Ober 1998, 200–206.

12 This is the sense, I take it, in which we should understand Socrates' claim that rhetoric as a species of *kolakeia* pretends to aim at the good, although it in fact aims only at pleasure (464c–d): to be successful the rhetor must adopt as his own the *demos'* hedonist assumptions.

is more than merely an accidental feature of it. Rather, it is something that determines what rhetoric is. What I want to suggest in this chapter is that the very same assumption that allows Socrates to claim that rhetoric must aim at pleasure is also what allows him to claim that it cannot proceed in accordance with “the nature and cause” of pleasure, that is, in a scientific manner. The explanation for his denial that rhetoric proceeds like a *technē*, in other words, is also to be sought in his diagnosis of democratic politics as the power of *dēmos* over *rhetor*.

Rhetoric as *kolakeia*

The first thing to do, however, is to address a preliminary, yet rarely discussed, question about Socrates’ characterization of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. Rhetoric, Socrates argues, turns out to be a pleasure-oriented activity in that it simply gives the audience what they want (pleasure), instead of what would be good for them. The question is: how does it bring about pleasure in the audience? What kind of pleasure does Socrates have in mind here? The answer to this question, I suggest, turns on our understanding of Socrates’ characterization of pleasure-oriented rhetoric as a form of *kolakeia*. Here, much hinges on how we translate the Greek term in question. It often translated as “flattery”, and so it has often been assumed that it is ‘flattering’ speech itself, i.e. what is said by the rhetor, that is what is experienced as pleasant. After all, to have nice things said about you simply is pleasurable. Note that, on this view, the pleasure caused by rhetoric is a function of the speech alone. What the rhetor says leads to pleasure simply because it praises and compliments the audience in some way. Listening to the flattering rhetor we come to be put in certain pleasant states of mind, like, say, feeling proud of ourselves, or righteously indignant towards others. Plato certainly did see this as one important way in which rhetoric could bring about pleasure. In the *Menexenus*, Socrates describes, with obvious irony, how he is affected by listening to the funeral orations held for the war dead by prominent Athenian rhetors.¹³ For the speakers, he points out, praise not only the dead, but also the city itself and its citizens in general.

The result is, Menexenus, that I am put into an exalted frame of mind when I am praised by them. Each time, as I listen and fall under their spell,

13 Cf. Loraux 1986, 311. Loraux shows how this description is an adaption of Aristophanes *Wasps* 636–642.

I become a different man—I'm convinced that I have become taller and nobler and better looking all of a sudden. [...] And this high-and-mighty feeling remains with me for more than three days. The speaker's words and the sound of his voice sink into my ears with so much resonance that it is only with difficulty that on the third or fourth day I recover myself and realize where I am. Until then I could imagine that I dwell in the islands of the blessed. That's how clever our rhetors are.

Mx. 235a6–c5; trans. RYAN, modified

This is also how scholars have usually understood Socrates' suggestion in the *Gorgias* that rhetoric is a form of pleasure-producing *kolakeia*.¹⁴ In praising the audience it brings about pleasure simply by "the inculcation of certain enjoyable feelings", as Woolf writes (2004, 121).

However, while the adoption of this line of reasoning is both understandable and natural, it is important to note that the *Gorgias* itself points to a more complicated picture of the relation between *kolakeia* and pleasure. To begin, the form of public speaking whose effects Socrates eloquently describes in the *Menexenus* is that of a funeral oration, that is, a ritual speech in celebration of those fallen in war in the course of the previous year. As a ritual of civic religion, such a speech was not formally part of any decision making process; the audience to which it was given was not one directly charged with deciding what to do. This does not mean, of course, that a speaker could not use the occasion to promote, more or less openly, a particular policy. But the actual adoption of one course of action over another would normally be decided in a different institutional context.¹⁵ Importantly, this makes a speech like that of the *Menexenus* somewhat unhelpful as a model for the notion of public speaking that serves as the subject matter of the discussion in the *Gorgias*. As Gorgias himself puts it in the early part of the dialogue, rhetoric is "the ability to persuade by speeches the citizen-judges in a law court, the council members at a council meeting, and the assemblymen in a popular assembly or in any other gathering of a political nature" (452e1–4). Common to each of these contexts for the exercise of rhetoric is that they are all in some sense *deliberative*. They are 'political' gatherings in that they are *loci* of collective decision making.¹⁶ This, of course, is why the notion of persuasion is held

14 Thus, explicitly, Schofield 2006, 72–74; cf. Tsitsiridis 1998, 65.

15 Cf. Yunis 1996, 81–82. Yunis argues that Pericles' funeral speech in Thucydides (the speech he discusses) can nonetheless be understood as deliberative in a broader, more indirect sense.

16 Cf. Yunis 1996, 120. Dodds rightly notes that "to describe a court of law as a 'civic assembly'

out by Gorgias as a defining feature of the skill he professes to teach (452e–453a): rhetoric manifests itself as the attempt to persuade the audience to do something rather than something else. In keeping with this conception of rhetoric as first and foremost understood in relation to questions about what to do, Socrates and Gorgias go on, shortly after, to speak of the role of the rhetor as that of an ‘adviser’. They thus adopt the term used by the Athenians to refer to the speakers who addressed them in the assembly.¹⁷ The rhetor, they both assume, is someone who (persuasively) offers his advice (cf. συμβουλεύσει; 455b4; συμβουλεύειν, d3; συμβουλῆς, e2; also 455e5; 456a2) so as to help a deliberating body reach a decision about what to do. Rhetoric, it is assumed by both Gorgias and Socrates, is directed at *action*.

Here it is helpful to bear in mind another feature of Athenian political discourse that seems to underlie the discussion. In response to Socrates’ very first question, Gorgias agrees that what he teaches is *rhētorikē* and that he is himself a *rhētōr* (448e6–449a8). Given the obvious linguistic connection between these terms and our modern word ‘rhetoric’ it is easy to come to assume a rather narrow conception of the former as referring exclusively to a specialized and self-contained discipline, namely, ‘the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing’.¹⁸ But two things should be borne in mind: (1) the technical term *rhētorikē*—the art of the *rhētōr*—was most likely of Plato’s own coinage for use in the *Gorgias*,¹⁹ and (2) in an Athenian political context the term *rhētōr*, in particular, took on a much broader and more distinctively political meaning than, say, our word ‘rhetorician’. As Mogens Herman Hansen has shown, the phrase “rhetors and generals” (*rhētores kai stratēgoi*) was simply the common way of referring to the political leaders of democratic Athens (1983, 37–39). Although in a strictly legal sense it applied to any citizen who chose to address the assembly, in reality the term *rhētōr* was used in democratic political discourse for a member of that “small group of active citizens [who] dominated the decision-making assemblies by taking initiatives habitually, sometimes almost professionally” (54).²⁰ In this light it is not surprising that the first examples of actual *rhētores* in the *Gorgias* (other

[Dodd’s trans. of πολιτικός σύλλογος] is more natural to a Greek than to an Englishman, since Greek juries were very large, and were thought of as representing the whole body of citizens in its judicial capacity” (1959, 202).

17 Ober 1989, 317–318.

18 This is the definition suggested by the pre-installed Apple Dictionary on my computer.

19 See Schiappa 2003, 40–49. Cf. Hermann 2011, 27 nio. It was only with Aristotle that ‘rhetoric’ acquired a narrow technical sense, cf. Yunis 1996, 17.

20 Cf. also Jaeger 1973 [1933], 369; Herrmann 2011, 27–28; Yunis 1996, 10; Schiappa 2003, 40; 41.

than Gorgias himself) are Themistocles and Pericles, held out as successful ‘advisers’ to the popular assembly in important policy decisions (455e–456a). In fact, even the historical Gorgias himself can be understood as a rhetor in this broader, political sense. Not only is he reported by later sources to have had prominent political leaders, like Pericles, among his students (DK 82 A2), which might suggest a certain political activism. In addition to being the teacher of a skill, he was also a political figure in his own right. As the leader of the embassy sent to Athens to ask for protection against Syracuse, he addressed the Athenian assembly and successfully “persuaded them to make an alliance with Leontini” (DK 82 A4). Given this prominent role in foreign affairs, he is likely to have been active on the political scene in his hometown, and while we, unlike Dionysius the elder, do not have any of his “popular addresses” (δημηγορικοῖς [sc. λόγοις], DK 82 B6), we do know of some of the issues he promoted. Thus Philostratus, in an account of various speeches for which Gorgias was famous, mentions that

the *Olympian Speech* dealt with the greatest political matters. For observing that the Greeks were fighting among themselves, he served as an adviser [ξύμβουλος] for national unity by encouraging them to take arms against the barbarians, and urging them to take as prizes of war not each others’ cities but the land of the barbarians.

Lives of the Sophists 1.9.4 = DK 82 A1; trans. GRAHAM 2010, modified

When viewed in this capacity, Gorgias himself, as a rhetor, confirms the main point I want to make. Rhetoric, in the *Gorgias*, is assumed to belong, first and foremost, within the domain of political advocacy, that is, to be an activity that is directed at action of some kind, rather than simply at being emotionally effective. This is why something like the annual funeral oration, being not obviously part of a deliberative procedure, is not the most appropriate model for understanding the notion of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. It is telling that, in a later passage, Socrates can speak, straightforwardly, of both speech *and* action as part of the activity of a rhetor as such (504d5–8). The tool of the rhetor may indeed only be “speech”, as Gorgias suggests (450b6–c1), but he is someone who uses that speech to make things happen. That is, the application of speech is assumed to result in an action that can be seen as, in some sense, *his*. The construction of the ‘Middle Wall’, for instance, may rightly be listed among the ‘deeds’ of Pericles the rhetor (455e5–6), even if all he did was to persuasively advise the popular assembly.

Understanding rhetoric as action-directed in this sense is crucial for answering the question how rhetoric, as a form of *kolakeia*, produces pleasure in its

audience. Rhetoric, as Socrates repeatedly puts it, aims at gratifying its audience, i.e. giving them pleasure, instead of making them “better” by improving their souls (502e2–503a1; 504d–e). To make this point Socrates uses the comparison with a certain misguided way of going about caring for the body. To simply indiscriminately “fill up” (ἀποπιμπλάναι) whatever appetites the body has will, he points out, result in disease or worse, rather than in making it healthy (505a6).²¹ Likewise, if what we do is simply to satisfy the appetites of the soul we will make it “foolish, undisciplined, unjust and impious”, rather than the opposite. What the celebrated *rhētores* of Athenian history (Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades and Pericles) really engaged in was, according to Socrates, merely this “filling up of appetites” (τὸ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἀποπιμπλάναι), with the effect of making the Athenians become “worse”, rather than “better” (503c1–d3). But in what way are the appetites of the soul of the audience ‘filled up’ by a rhetor? In the *Gorgias*, Socrates assumes that they are so by means of the actions towards which the rhetor’s persuasive speech is aimed, not by the speech itself. This important point is made clear in several passages. Having renewed his claim that rhetoric is merely *kolakeia* aimed at pleasure, Socrates suggests:

Shouldn’t we then strive to care for the city and its citizens with the aim of making the citizens themselves as good as possible? For without this, as we discovered before, it’s no good to provide any other service [ἐὐεργεσίαν] if the intentions of those who would be making a great deal of money or acquiring rule over others or some other position of power aren’t admirable and good.

Gorg. 513e5–514a3; trans. ZEYL

Socrates does not here contrast ‘making the citizens better’ with the rhetor’s *telling* them pleasant things that make them worse. Rather, Socrates seems to assume that to gratify the citizens (rather than making them better) amounts to providing them with ‘services’ or ‘benefits’ in the form of wealth and positions of power and domination. The backwards reference to what “we discovered before” is to 504d–505b,²² where physical disease is said to be caused by the indiscriminate filling up of the appetites of the body. The corresponding filling up of the appetites of the soul is now taken to be the furnishing of the

21 Socrates specifies that, in the case of a body that is already healthy, doctors generally do allow the person to satisfy whatever appetites he has, since those appetites will for the most part be correct (or at least not harmful). But the analogy with democratic politics makes clear that that is *not* the condition that characterizes Athens.

22 Cf. Dodds 1959, 353.

citizens with money and power. What is pleasant for them, but detrimental to their ‘psychic’ health is, in other words, the provision of such services (not something the rhetor says).

It is surely no coincidence that Socrates’ examples of ‘gratifying’ services in the above passage are, specifically, wealth and rule over others. For his understanding of rhetoric as a pleasure-oriented activity comes out most emphatically in the discussion of those political leaders under which Athens rose to dominate most of the Greek world, politically, militarily, and economically. Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades and Pericles, Socrates iconoclastically suggests, were not good men who aimed at the good of the citizens. If they did distinguish themselves from contemporary *rhētores* it is only in that they were “more capable than they of providing the city with what it desires” (ἐκπορίζειν τῇ πόλει ὧν ἐπεθύμει, 517b2–5), which Socrates immediately goes on to explain as the provision of desired ‘services’. “Yes, I too agree with you that they were more clever than our present [rhetors] at providing [ἐκπορίζειν] ships and walls and dockyards and many other things of the sort” (c2–4). Significantly, the root of the verb translated as “providing” in these two passages (ἐκπορίζειν) is the same as that of the word Socrates uses when he says that rhetoric “provides its pleasures” (πορίζεται τὰς ἡδονάς) in an unscientific way (501b1). The pleasure aimed at by rhetoric, in other words, is something like the pleasure that accompanied the realization of the *policies* advocated by the four famous Athenian leaders.²³ What was pleasurable to the citizens was what those leaders *did* for the city. This is made even clearer in the case of Pericles.

But tell me this as well. Are the Athenians said to have become better because of Pericles, or, quite to the contrary, are they said to have been corrupted by him? For that is what I hear, anyway: that Pericles made the Athenians idle and cowardly, chatterers and money-grubbers, by being the first to institute allowances for them.

Gorg. 515e2–7; trans. ZEYL, modified

Pericles, as a rhetor, gratified his audience, the Athenians, by introducing a particular institution, namely a system of maintenance allowance or ‘wages’ to citizens who did duty as jurors in law courts (and perhaps also to those who served as soldiers/sailors and as councilmen). It was by instituting this

23 Cf. also Socrates’ later description of his own (hypothetical) trial: “I will neither be able to tell [the jurors] about any pleasures I’ve provided—those pleasures they regard as services and benefits—, nor will I envy those who provide such things or those for whom they are provided” (522b4–6). For a similar reading see Sharples 1994, 49.

‘pleasurable’ arrangement, Socrates claims, that Pericles made them worse since he thereby encouraged those vices that, at least in the eyes of critics (in antiquity and today), always accompany the expansion of state subsidies of any kind.²⁴ However, the central point is that, for Socrates, it is first and foremost by *making certain things happen* that rhetors can be understood as agents of pleasure. It is by what they *do* that they cause pleasure, not simply by what they say.

This conclusion points to an alternative understanding of the relation between *kolakeia* and pleasure in Socrates’ conception of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. To engage in *kolakeia* towards someone does not so much imply *saying* nice things about him or her. It rather consists in catering for and indulging that person in the pursuit of whatever desires he or she might have. The account of rhetoric as a pleasure-oriented *kolakeia* suggested here thus differs from the understanding often found in the literature on the *Gorgias*. On that view, as we saw, what is pleasurable is the ‘flattering’ speech itself. But I suggest we follow David Sedley in preferring to translate the Greek term “ingratiation” rather than “flattery”.²⁵ For, on the view I propose, the *kolakeia* of rhetoric rather consists in uncritically providing the audience with pleasurable things. What is pleasurable is what the rhetors *do* by means of their political advocacy, their results and achievements as promoters of pleasurable policies.

Democracy and *technē*

Rhetoric, then, is a pleasure-oriented activity in that it provides its audience with pleasurable things by means of political advocacy. With this in mind, we can finally return to the original question: why cannot rhetoric pursue this production of pleasure in a scientific way, as a genuine *technē*? Rhetoric, as we have seen, proceeds by means of persuasion, and at an early point in the dialogue Socrates distinguishes between two ways in which someone can be persuaded (454c7–d3): to have been persuaded can take the form of either “having learned” (μεμαθηκέναι) or “having come to believe” (πεπιστευκέναι), and, accordingly, it can result in either “knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη) or “conviction” (πίστις). What distinguishes these two forms of persuasion is that whereas

24 For the details of Pericles’ introduction of *misthophoria* see Dodds 1959, 356. As Dodds notes, it is fairly clear how idleness and greediness could be interpreted as consequences of such a scheme. Talkativeness and cowardice are more difficult, but he suggests that the former might be the result of greater incitement to attend council meetings and the latter of degrading the military “to the mercenary level”.

25 Sedley 2009, 51.

conviction can be both true and false, knowledge allows only of truth (d4–e2). Importantly, Socrates then has Gorgias agree that the exercise of rhetoric is restricted to only the former of these kinds of persuasion. Its persuasion is, as Socrates puts it, one of “convincing” (πιστευτικῆς) rather than “teaching” (διδασκαλικῆς, e5–455a2).

Commentators have not been slow to point to the significance of this distinction for the philosophical edifices developed and constructed in other, later, dialogues. “The distinction between knowledge and opinion, which is the foundation not only of Plato’s epistemology but of his metaphysics, is here formally drawn for the first time” (Dodds 1959, 206). But it is important to note that although the terminology employed here might be Plato’s own, the underlying idea was one that, as he himself recognized, could be found in contemporary rhetorical theory, too. Thus in the *Phaedrus*, he has Socrates criticize how certain teachers of rhetoric used the same distinction in an attempt to specify a proper procedure in their discipline. Practitioners of rhetoric, these people claim, have no need to concern themselves with the truth of the matter.

For in the law courts there is no care for the truth of these things, only for what is plausible [τοῦ πιθανοῦ]. This is ‘the likely’ [τὸ εἰκός], and anyone who intends to speak according to art should concentrate on that. Sometimes, in fact, whether in prosecution or defense, you are not to say what actually happened, if it was not likely to have happened—you are to say what is likely. On the whole, you must go for what is likely and leave the truth aside.

Phaedr. 272d7–e5

Socrates’ distinction in the *Gorgias* between persuasion as ‘teaching knowledge’ and as ‘bringing about conviction’ should be understood against this background. In fact, at an earlier point in the *Phaedrus* Gorgias himself is explicitly mentioned as a proponent of the same view that “what is likely should be preferred to what is true” (*Phaedr.* 267a6–7),²⁶ and so it is not surprising that, in the *Gorgias*, he is eager to accept Socrates’ suggestion concerning the type of persuasion involved in the exercise of rhetoric (454e3–9). Rhetoric, he goes on to agree a few Stephanus pages later, does not proceed in the way a teacher does: by giving the pupil an understanding of the truth of the matter. Rather, the “conviction” the rhetor produces in his audience, and which may or may

26 Tordesillas refers to this slogan as “die philosophische Grundlage der Rhetorik” (2007, 1007).

not be true, is the result of its being merely “plausible” (πιθανόν, 458e6–459a1). The successful prosecuting rhetor is not someone who tries to make the jury members reach the right decision by ‘teaching’ them the truth about the circumstances that make the defendant guilty. He is someone who tries to make them reach the right decision by ‘convincing’ them that that the defendant is *likely* to be guilty.

But why should it not be possible for a persuasive rhetor to ‘teach’ his audience the truth, rather than merely ‘convincing’ them by means of the likely? We might perhaps expect the reason to simply be an assumed ignorance on the part of the rhetor or the audience or both. After all, Socrates will later make much of the fact that the rhetor need not himself be knowledgeable in order to persuade an ignorant crowd (458e–459c). But this is not the reason Socrates gives at this point in the *Gorgias*. Rather he suggests that rhetoric’s inability to ‘teach’ has to do with the *conditions* under which the rhetor operates:

So a rhetor is not a teacher of law courts and other crowds about what is just and unjust, but merely someone who convinces them. For [γάρ] I don’t suppose that he would be able to teach such a large crowd [ὄχλον ... τοσοῦτον] about important matters in only a short time [ἐν ὀλίγῳ χρόνῳ].

Gorg. 455a2–6

As Dodds points out, Socrates is in this passage alluding to the time limitation on speeches delivered in the law courts, as measured by means of the water clock (1959, 207).²⁷ But Socrates tellingly juxtaposes this procedural constraint on public speech, which makes persuasive ‘teaching’ impossible, with the general challenge of having to address a “crowd” (ὄχλον, 455a5; cf. 454e6). As Dodds continues his commentary on the passage, “there is implicit [in the reference to the clepsydra] a more general criticism of democratic procedures, which put a premium on the ability to get quick results by substituting mass-suggestion for proof” (207). What is implicit in the *Gorgias* is helpfully spelled out by the

27 The connection is made explicit in the *Theaetetus* when Socrates asks his interlocutor about “the rhetors and lawyers” and whether he thinks “there are teachers so clever as to be able to teach adequately [διδάξαι ἱκανῶς], in a bit of water’s time [πρὸς ὕδωρ σμικρὸν], the truth of what happened” (*Theaet.* 201a7–b3). The same complaint about the conditions for public speaking is found in the *Apology*: “I am convinced that I never willingly wrong anyone, but I am not convincing you of this, for we have talked together but a short time [ὀλίγον ... χρόνον]. If it were the law with us, as it is elsewhere, that a trial for life should not last one but many days, you would be convinced, but now it is not easy to dispel great slanders in a short time [ἐν χρόνῳ ὀλίγῳ]” (*Apol.* 37a6–b2; trans. Grube).

Theaetetus.²⁸ For Socrates' famous 'digression' in that dialogue contains a vivid portrayal of Athenian political life that explicitly associates the external constraints on the rhetor's speech with the oppressive nature of the political system under which he works. "Those who have been knocking about in law courts and other such places since they were boys", Socrates provocatively suggests, are comparable to "the slaves of a household" (ὥς οἰκέται, *Theaet.* 172c8–d2). They are, as he puts a little later, engaged in "acts of slavelike servility" (δουλικὰ [...] διακονήματα) and aim at pleasing their master (ᾧ ψον ἡδύναι ἢ θῶπας λόγους, 175e2–4; cf. διακονεῖν, e6). All this clearly recalls the account of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. But in the *Theaetetus* passage Socrates also stresses how this subservient role does not merely mean that rhetoric has its *aim* dictated to it by the preferences of its audience. It also has implications for the *conditions* under which rhetoric can pursue this aim.

[The Athenian rhetors] are always in a hurry when they speak [ἐν ἀσχαλίᾳ τε αἰεὶ λέγουσι], urged on by the running of the water [κατεπείγει γὰρ ὕδωρ ῥέον], and they aren't free to make speeches on what they want. For they have their adversary standing over them, wielding compulsory powers [ἀνάγκην] and an outline of the proceeding, which is read out point by point and must be kept to. The speeches are always about a fellow-slave [ὁμοδούλου] and addressed to a master [δεσπότην], who sits there holding some penalty in his hand, and the contests are never a matter of detached disinterest. They always concern the speaker himself, and often even his life is at stake.

Theaet. 172d9–173a1

The metaphor of slavery and compulsion is used to convey a particular conception of the circumstances under which rhetoric must be exercised in democratic Athens. The rhetor is emphatically *not* in the position of a 'teacher' who, in a calm and detached manner, can persuade his 'pupil' by means of knowledge, however long that takes. Rather, he is in the position of a servant at the mercy of an impatient and choleric master, who bosses and bullies him around, and for whom the good servant is first and foremost someone who is "quick and sharp" (*Theaet.* 175e5), rather than, say, thorough and disinterested. This is another way, I take it, in which rhetoric is like the banausic and lowly activities with which Socrates compares it in the *Gorgias* (463b1–6). Cosmetics, for instance, is described as "sordid" (ἀγεννής) and "unfree" (ἀνελεύθερος, 465b3–4),

28 For this connection see Wardy 1996, 169 n15.

and Socrates repeatedly imagines the cook as having to fiercely compete for the attention of his customers (464d–e; 521e–522a). Like democratic rhetoric, these activities are exercised under competitive conditions—those of the *agora* on market day—with each practitioner aggressively vying with his rivals for the customers passing by, whose whims and tastes are always the final judge and who do not have patience for long-winded lectures or explanations.

In the *Theaetetus* digression, then, Plato colorfully presents the restrictive conditions for public speech as simply the function of having an ill-tempered *dēmos* as master, not unlike the busy and easily distracted customer in the market place. But we should note that in the case of rhetoric, at least, there is more to it than this. For in classical Athens the ruthlessly competitive and highly charged environment in which democratic public speaking took place did in fact serve the more (politically) rational purpose of consolidating the people's control over their would-be leaders. Pitting elite speakers against each other in tightly regulated contests and requiring them to put their own person on the line helped to prevent anti-democratic cooperation within the elite and to legitimize and reinforce the political role of the *dēmos* as the final judge and authority in the city, with power over life and death.²⁹ Moreover, as Plato himself recognizes, it also had the effect of making the rhetors more directly dependent on, and committed to, majority belief. This was not just in the sense of having to adopt the same values and aims of the *dēmos*. In the lines following the passage from the *Phaedrus*, cited above, Socrates goes on to point out (following Tisias) that the distinction between what is true and what is likely is really the distinction between what is true and “what seems to the majority” (τὸ τῷ πλῇθι δοκοῦν, *Phaedr.* 273a7–b1). It is surely no coincidence that this phrase recalls the enactment formula of Athenian legislation: “it seemed to the *dēmos* ...” was not just a descriptive statement about what the majority happened to believe, but an institutionalized speech-act by which assembly decisions acquired the force of law. By forcing public speakers to rely on the ‘likely’, at the expense of teaching of the truth, (so Socrates suggests) the Athenians forced them to recognize and legitimize, in practice, the principle on which the political regime rested: that the beliefs and expectations of the people are authoritative.³⁰

29 Cf. Ober 1989, 243, 291, 328, 332–333; 1996, 28.

30 The ideological function of restrictions on public speech in Athens, which is here seen by Plato as a scandalous and harmful intrusion by politics into the sphere of science and truth, was probably perceived very differently by ordinary Athenians. “For most Athenians”, Josiah Ober writes, “the shocking ‘post-modern’ conclusion that ‘all knowledge is political’ (i.e. implicated in relations of power) was simply a truism: neither the possibility

Now, I want to suggest that this domination by the *dēmos* over the rhetor, forcing him to resort to and legitimize majority belief, is what explains rhetoric's incapacity for functioning as a *technē* in the *Gorgias*. In the above example of the law courts from the *Phaedrus*, the "truth" that the rhetor should "leave aside" in favor of "the likely" is the truth about the actual circumstances surrounding an alleged crime. Thus, unlike Socrates, Gorgias and his fellow teachers of rhetoric are made to assume that the demotic jurymen will be genuinely interested in seeing justice done, rather than simply seeking pleasure for themselves. But even on Socrates' less optimistic interpretation of the motives of the *dēmos*, where the relevant truth is the truth about what is pleasurable, it is clear that the *type* of persuasion involved will be the same: it must appeal to what is 'likely'. This, I think, is the key to the puzzle with which we began the chapter. The rhetor, I argued, provides pleasure in that he persuades his audience to do pleasurable things. Now, if he were in fact in a position to 'teach' his audience, there is no reason why rhetoric would not be able to proceed towards its aim in a scientific manner. For to teach someone is to give them knowledge, as we saw, and knowledge is about the truth of the matter. So, on that scenario, we could imagine a form of rhetoric that makes the audience decide what to do in accordance with "the nature and cause of pleasure", that is, with what would be scientifically guaranteed to give them pleasure. If what would truly give them pleasure would be to do x, rather than y, the rhetor would make them see that this is so and they would decide accordingly. However, Socrates insists, the dynamics of democratic politics means that rhetoric is exactly *not* in a position to engage in this kind of 'teaching'. An Athenian rhetor, if he wants to persuade the audience that they should do some pleasurable thing, cannot rely on an appeal to the truth about what is pleasurable. He will get nowhere if he attempts to 'teach' the *dēmos* about the nature and cause of pleasure. All he can do, under the restrictive conditions offered by democratic politics, is to appeal to what the audience *expects* will be pleasurable. He can only persuade them to do x, if they are already willing to believe that x is something pleasurable.

But what the audience is ready to believe is pleasurable is, of course, not itself the outcome of a scientific investigation into pleasure. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates explicitly denies that we can expect to find genuine scientific knowledge in popular beliefs and opinions (458e–459a). Presumably, the many's expectations of what is pleasurable are instead merely the result of a crude reliance on experience and memory. They unreflectively infer from past pleasures to

nor the normative desirability of genuinely apolitical forms of knowledge about society or its members ever entered the ordinary Athenian's head" (1998, 34).

what will be pleasurable in the future, without any systematic investigation into the nature of pleasure. As we saw in the previous chapter, this is precisely the sort of empiricist understanding of belief formation among ordinary people generally, and the Athenian *dēmos* specifically, that Plato's hints at in the image of the cave from the *Republic* (*Resp.* 516c8–d2). The consequence is that rhetoric, as an activity subservient to the *dēmos*, will never be able to pursue its aim in the way required for being a genuine *technē*. The rhetor cannot proceed in accordance with a scientific understanding of the nature and cause of pleasure, but is constrained by the unscientific expectations his audience happens to have as a result of previous experience. This, I suggest, is the sense in which rhetoric itself, as Socrates began by claiming, turns out to be *empeiria*, rather than *technē*. What Socrates is describing with this term, *empeiria*, is not so much the skill itself as the unscientific foundation on which it rests. The 'experience' in question, in other words, is that of the audience as much as that of the rhetor. When rhetoric pursues its aim in accordance with popular expectations, it necessarily does so on the basis of what is mere "experience" (462c3; 463b4) and unsystematic "guesswork" (463a7; 464c6; 465a2).

Scientific Politics and the Power of the People

We can now see how Socrates' diagnosis of democratic politics as the domination of *dēmos* over *rhētōr* explains both of the two elements in Socrates' characterization of rhetoric. It explains both (1) why rhetoric is a pleasure-oriented activity, and (2) why, in addition to being a pleasure-oriented activity, it lacks the scientific procedure that characterizes a *technē*. But what, we might ask, is ultimately at stake for Socrates in making the latter claim? After all, the former argument that rhetoric, as an activity subservient to the *dēmos*, must necessarily aim at pleasure, rather than the good, might seem to give him all he really needs. It shows both that rhetoric is not what its advocates thought it was (an instrument of power over the *dēmos*), and it shows that democratic politics is itself a degenerate form of government (aimed at gratification rather than the good of the city). Rhetoric, in short, is both servile and bad. So why is it so important for Socrates to make the separate criticism that rhetoric cannot pursue its aim in a scientific manner? One common suggestion offered here is that Socrates' argument should perhaps be understood as motivated more by dramatic or psychological than by philosophical reasons. It is, so the suggestion goes, first and foremost an *ad hominem* dig at those self-professed and self-important 'teachers of rhetoric' who had begun to appear in the second half of the fifth century and to whom Socrates' two first interlocutors in the dialogue

belong. In particular, with his denial of the status of *technē* to rhetoric Socrates is often seen to be poking fun at Polus, the author of an allegedly scientific treatise on rhetoric (462b10–c1; 448c4–9). Polus is not merely not the teacher of a *technē* that gives its practitioner great power, so Socrates teases him, he is not the teacher of a *technē* at all.³¹

To be sure, teasing Gorgias and Polus in this way is likely to be part of what Socrates is up to. But I believe the interpretation proposed above can help us discern a much more important purpose to his argument. During the discussion with Callicles Socrates reiterates the earlier division of activities into good-oriented activities and pleasure-oriented ingratiation (500e–502d), and then goes on to apply the schema to the question of democratic politics again by asking Callicles to characterise the *rhetoires* that address the popular assembly.

What about the rhetoric addressed to the Athenian *dēmos* and to those bodies of free men in other cities? What is our view of this kind? Do you think the rhetors always speak with regard to what is best, guessing at this [τούτου στοχάζόμενοι], so as to make the citizens as good as possible through their speeches? Or are they, too, bent upon the gratification of the citizens, and, slighting the common good for the sake of their own private good, do they treat the citizens like children, trying only to gratify them?

Gorg. 502d10–e8; trans. ZEYL, modified

Callicles' response to this question provides Socrates with a welcome opportunity to launch what amounts to a major exercise in revisionist history. Contrary to what Callicles and the Athenians in general believe, Socrates provocatively argues in what follows that not even the four most legendary leaders of democratic Athens—Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles—can rightly be said to belong in the category of those who have made the citizens better (503c–d; 518e–519b). Servile ingratiation on the part of politicians is not just a contemporary phenomenon; it is endemic to *all* democratic politics.³²

31 Cf. Yunis 1996, 124. Similarly, Dodds (1959, 10) takes Socrates' denial of the status of *technē* to rhetoric as intended only to show that "the kind of education offered by Gorgias" is "inadequate" (as separate from his further argument that it is also "dangerous"). Irwin, too, seems to subscribe to a version of this view when he reads the denial as merely Socrates' way of highlighting what he (Socrates) takes to be Polus' (and perhaps Gorgias') excessively empirical conception of *technē* (1979, 130).

32 On Socrates' attempt at a revised history of Athens' political history: Yunis 1996, 136–153; Schofield 2006, 70–74.

But Socrates' question to Callicles, as cited above, also points to another implication for democracy of his account of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. What catches the reader's eye is a striking use of terminology in Socrates' description of the hypothetical case of a good-oriented democratic rhetor. Even in this hypothetical scenario, Socrates stresses, it would still be the case that the rhetor would have to "guess" at what is good (τούτου στοχαζόμενοι). Now, it is true that the verb στοχαζέσθαι can have the less specific meaning of simply "to aim at" or "to strive after", and this is how it is often translated here.³³ But there is good reason not to take the word in that sense here. For within the theoretical context of the *Gorgias* the term στοχαζέσθαι clearly carries the more specific meaning of (mere) guesswork, as opposed to scientific procedure.³⁴ The rhetor is described by Socrates as someone who is not "scientific" (τεχνικόν) but rather "good at guessing" (ψυχῆς [...] στοχαστικῆς, 463a7);³⁵ and the pleasure-oriented activities are said to proceed by "guessing" (στοχασσάμενη) rather than by "knowing" (γνοῦσα, 464c6).³⁶ Likewise, in the *Philebus* Socrates opposes "the capacities for guessing" (ταῖς τῆς στοχαστικῆς [...] δυνάμεσιν) and reliance on "likely conjecture" (εἰκάζειν) to more scientific activities, and associates the former closely with "experience and routine" (ἐμπειρίᾳ καὶ τινι τριβῇ, *Phil.* 55e5–56a1).

I argued above that rhetoric cannot be more than such unscientific guesswork because, in its pursuit of pleasure, it is constrained by the merely experience-based expectations of the *dēmos*. However, what Socrates indicates in the above passage is that he intends the argument about democracy and *technē* as a separate and distinct point of criticism: even if we hypothetically assumed a democratic society whose politics were genuinely concerned with what would be best, rather than what would merely be pleasant, its rhetors would *still* have to pursue their good-oriented policies in an unscientific manner.³⁷ The argument, in other words, amounts to a criticism of the *inadequacy* of democracy, as a political system that is incompatible with scientific procedure. Democratic decision-making depends on popular consent, but, given the power-relations of democratic politics, popular consent can only be had by unscientifically

33 Thus in the translations by Jowett, Woodhead, and Zeyl, respectively.

34 Cf. Woolf 2004, 119; Schiefelky 2005, 361–362.

35 Cf. Dodds 1959, 225.

36 Cf. also 465a1–2 (discussed above): a *kolakeia* merely "guesses [στοχαζεται] at pleasure, without the good".

37 Note how this observation also speaks strongly against the common view, discussed above, that rhetoric's lack of scientific method is to be explained by reference to pleasure as a problematic object of scientific investigation. Even a 'good' democratic rhetor (if there were such a thing) would have to rely on guesswork.

arguing from what is 'likely' or 'plausible'. When the *dēmos* force their speakers to respect the authoritative status of public opinion and expectation, rather than allowing them to 'teach' the truth of the matter, they make it impossible for the city to pursue whatever political aim it might have in accordance with what "the nature and cause" of that aim dictates.

Socrates' criticism of democratic politics in the *Gorgias*, then, is not just a moral criticism, i.e. a criticism of the goals and values that characterise political life in a city in which the many rule. It is also a criticism of what Plato saw as the unscientific tendency of democracy to make mere *empeiria* authoritative. What is at stake can be helpfully illustrated by means of Socrates' own favourite comparison with the medical art. In order to make the body healthy, so we are reminded several times in this dialogue and elsewhere, the scientific exercise of medicine sometimes requires the employment of harsh measures such as starvation, cutting, and burning (456b3–4; 505a6–9; 521e6–522a1).³⁸ This, of course, is why a childish and pleasure-seeking audience will reject the doctor in favor of the cook and his tasty dishes (464d3–e2; 521e3–522a6). But the notion of the scientifically justified use of such extreme measures in medicine also brings into view a more general problem with making scientific procedure a matter of consent under democratic conditions for public speech. In real life most people do not go to visit the doctor in order to get pleasure; they do so in order to get better. So the problem with making the patient's consent a condition for the medical treatment, in normal cases, is not so much that the patient wants to be ingratiated, rather than to be well. The problem is that the patient's experience-based expectation may very well be that such things as starvation, cutting, and burning are detrimental to his health, i.e. that they are bad in addition to being unpleasant. After all, it is usually the case that being cut or burned is not what makes our bodies well. On the contrary, experience has presumably taught us that we should avoid, say, getting burnt if we want to stay healthy.³⁹ From the point of view of the common man, we can say, getting burnt is not 'likely' to lead to health. The implication, for both medicine and politics, is that the crude process of experience that informs and shapes common belief can never yield something like scientific understanding of what is required. Even if the aim

38 Cf. *Plt.* 293a2–3; Yunis 1996, 129–130.

39 "Greek medicine", Edelstein writes, "reversed man's natural belief; it had something paradoxical about it. [...] [T]he Greeks and Romans never ceased wondering about the paradox that by cauterizing and cutting, by doing violence to his body, man should achieve health, that good should come of something that in itself is painful and causes suffering" (1987, 349).

itself is right, the expectations of the majority offer no guidance as to how that aim is scientifically pursued. Of course, if favorable circumstances allow the doctor to explain and ‘teach’ the patient about the scientific justification for the treatment he advocates, the requirement of consent need not, perhaps, be an obstacle to the proper exercise of medicine.⁴⁰ But if the doctor, like the democratic rhetor in Athens, is practicing his art of healing under conditions that force him to recognize the authority of popular belief by appealing to what people’s experience tells them to expect, he will not be able to consistently proceed towards the health of his patient in a scientific manner. The ideological mechanisms that guarantee and consolidate demotic control are also what impede scientific procedure.

In the *Gorgias*, this line of criticism of democratic politics is still somewhat in the background. It clearly stands in the shadow of Socrates’ passionate assault on the moral character of Athenian political life, as corrupt beyond repair. But as we shall see in the next chapter, it was a line of argument that Plato would later pick up and place at the center of his analysis of democracy. In the *Statesman*, to be sure, the Eleatic Stranger points to the people’s misunderstanding of the nature of *technē* itself, rather than their institutionalized hold on political power, as the cause of democratic politics’ deviation from strictly scientific principles. But the core political argument of that dialogue, too, turns on the inability of merely experience-based beliefs to yield an understanding of politics that can properly be called a *technē*. If politics is to be conducted in a scientific manner, both dialogues agree, it cannot be conducted on the basis of whatever beliefs people happen to hold on the basis of experience. What distinguishes the two dialogues, as we shall see, is that in the case of the *Statesman* a significant value is nonetheless ascribed to certain forms of collective experience: a city that is governed in accordance with its ancestral laws and customs does get something right, even if it will never be more than an imitation of expert rule.

40 In the *Laws*, a much later dialogue, the good lawgiver’s use of persuasive preambles to his laws is compared to the practice of a ‘free’ doctor who does not proceed with his treatment until he has made the patient “amenable by means of persuasion” (720d7). However, what Plato imagines in the *Laws* is not a democracy: the enforcement of the laws, despite its diplomatic packaging, is not negotiable. Cf. Schofield 2006, 84–87.

Democracy as Imitator: Expertise and Democratic Conservatism in the *Statesman*

Turning to the *Statesman* after a reading of the *Gorgias* is like entering a different world altogether. Instead of the dramatic, passionate, and occasionally even aggressive exchange between Socrates and the power-hungry proponents of rhetoric we get a sober, technical, and emotionally detached conversation between an anonymous, but clearly philosophically trained, visitor to Athens and a young man named Socrates (no relation to the well-known philosopher, who is also present; cf. *Soph.* 218b). Whereas the *Gorgias* is shaped by the clash of values and world-views, the *Statesman* takes the form of a philosophical investigation conducted by two interlocutors with a genuine common interest in furthering understanding on a particular topic, the art of the statesman.

This general difference in intellectual atmosphere and attitude is also clear in the discussion of democracy and its epistemic potential that represents the culmination of an elaborate digression on types of political rule towards the end of the dialogue (*Plt.* 291a–303d). The *Statesman*, I will argue, takes up the basic suggestion made by Socrates in the *Gorgias*: the epistemic foundations of democratic politics are to be found in something like collective experience. But it develops this idea into a concrete claim to political expertise that is historically and ideologically associated with a specific form of democratic rule. This is accomplished by giving the notion of collective experience a distinctive conservative twist that was absent from the *Gorgias*. It is in the ancestral laws and customs that we find the fruits of a people's collective experience, and it is in virtue of adhering to these laws and customs that a democracy might claim to be ruled by something like political expertise. To be sure, in the *Statesman*, no less than elsewhere, Plato ultimately rejects democracy's claim to political expertise. Laws and customs, he argues, can by their very nature never live up to the standards of *technē*. But it is a testimony to the more open-minded and investigative spirit of the *Statesman* that this rejection is accompanied by the explicit recognition of some epistemic competence, however limited, in the city's laws and customs. Democracy and political knowledge are not necessarily complete opposites, after all.

Lawfulness and Imitation

One of the most central claims in the political theory of the *Statesman* is also among those that have been the least well understood. This is the claim, laid in the mouth of the Stranger from Elea (henceforth ‘the Stranger’), that non-ideal political regimes “must be put down as imitations” (μιμήματα) of the ideal rule (*Plt.* 297c1–2), that is, as imitations of rule by a true “statesman” (a *politikos*, cf. 257a4). On hearing the Stranger make this odd claim, his interlocutor, the young Socrates, helpfully asks for an explanation, “for I didn’t quite understand the point about imitations just made” (c5–6). The aim of this chapter is to make sense of the Stranger’s answer to this legitimate request. However, to fully appreciate the difficulties involved here, it is necessary to begin by briefly rehearsing the theory of statesmanship presented in the dialogue.

What structures the Stranger’s account is a sharply drawn contrast between expertise and law as the basis for political rule. To whom does the highest political authority properly belong—the expert or the laws? The Stranger presents the statesman’s expert knowledge as closely modeled on his general understanding of expertise and of what sets the expert apart from the non-expert. The distinguishing feature of the expert is his craftsmanlike ability to accurately hit upon the “appropriate” and “right” in each particular situation. When this conception is applied to the political realm, the statesman’s distinctive expertise thus comes to be first and foremost ‘managerial’: it consists in his ability to direct his subordinate experts (in particular judges, rhetoricians, and generals), deciding when and how it is ‘appropriate’ for them to make use of their respective skills and arts (305c–d).¹ This is the reason why an expert will always be superior to laws and rules. Good laws are those that prescribe what is best for the city according to the principle “for the majority, in most cases, and roughly like this” (295a5–6). But this means that even laws of this high quality can never be an adequate substitute for the expert’s distinctive sense of the ‘appropriate’ in each particular situation. For given “the dissimilarities between human beings and their actions, and the fact that practically nothing in human affairs ever remains stable” no general law will ever be able to “accurately [ἀκριβῶς] prescribe what is best” for all and in all situations (294a10–b6). On the contrary, as the Stranger picturesquely puts it, the laws will appear simple-minded and intolerant when confronted with the knowledge of the expert:

1 For the statesman as ‘manager’ see Schofield 2006, chapter 4.5.

This is what we see the law trying to do, like some stubborn and unlearned person, who allows no one to do anything contrary to what he orders, nor to ask any questions, not even if after all something new turns out for someone which is better, contrary to the orders he himself gives.

Plt. 294b8–c4; trans. ROWE, modified

The Stranger does admit that even a statesman, who for practical reasons cannot be everywhere at the same time, must himself make use of such general laws (294c10–295a8). But the overall conclusion is nonetheless clear: “The best is not that the laws are in power, but rather the kingly man who possesses wisdom” (294a7–8). Under the ideal regime, an expert statesman should therefore never be restricted in the exercise of his expertise by his previously established laws. If he finds that his expertise requires it, he should be able to simply “give different instructions contrary to these [laws]” (296a1). What distinguishes the expert from everybody else is first and foremost his ability to accurately judge what is appropriate in each case, and this is also what makes expertise inherently superior to the generality of law.

This conclusion secured, the Stranger now turns to consider and evaluate non-ideal political regimes. Here, the relation between expertise and law is given a surprising twist. For though it has been shown that the highest political authority rightly belongs to the expert statesman, the Stranger now goes on to add the striking claim with which we began: that “the remaining [kinds of rule] should be put down as imitations [μιμήματα] [...], some imitating it [the ideal] so as to be better [ἐπὶ τὰ καλλίονα], and some so as to be worse” (ἐπὶ τὰ αἰσχίω, 297c1–4). It quickly becomes clear that the former imitations are those political regimes where “no one in the city ventures to do anything contrary to the laws [παρὰ τοὺς νόμους]” (e1–2).² These regimes, which govern in accordance with the laws, the Stranger declares to be “second best” (δεύτερον, e4), and he will go on, later, to contrast them explicitly with those regimes where ignorant rulers disregard the laws and instead rely on their own inclination and judgment (300d–e).

But what does it mean to be an *imitation* of the ideal? For our purposes here it is helpful to begin by distinguishing two different but closely connected ideas that Plato often associates with imitation and imitators. Firstly, at the core of the notion of imitation lies the idea of producing a *likeness* of something.³ Of

² As Rowe rightly points out, the reference here is first and foremost to those in power, that is, the political regime itself (1995a, 227). The principle in question is that of *ruling* in accordance with the laws. Cf. the use of *nomoi* in Arist. *Pol.* 1289a18–20.

³ “Ein Gedanke an Ähnlichkeit ist für *mimēsthai* wesentlich” (Hirsch 1995, 184 n1).

course, for Plato much hinges on how exactly that likeness is produced, and imitation can function, depending on the context, as both the characteristic *modus operandi* of the ignorant and as an expression of the highest mortal aspirations. In the tenth book of the *Republic*, on the one hand, the imitative art of painters and poets is expelled from the ideal city because the likeness it produces is based solely on the purely external, and dangerously sensible, appearance of its model, as when a painting of a table is determined by the perspective from which it is observed (*Resp.* 597d–598b; cf. *Soph.* 234b). In the cosmological account of the *Timaeus*, on the other hand, the eponymous Locrian scientist explains how the wise and benevolent demiurge fashioned the movement of the wandering stars in order to make the cosmos “as like as possible to that perfect and intelligible Living Thing, by way of imitating its sempiternity” (τὴν τῆς διαιωνίας μίμησιν φύσεως, *Tim.* 39e1–2; trans. Zeyl). However, supervening on this idea of likeness creation is a further, less morally ambivalent, aspect of imitation that Plato repeatedly brings up. This is the idea of imitation as an act of *deception* and *pretense*, that is, the act of making something out to be what it is not. As Socrates puts it in the discussion from the *Republic* referred to above: “For example, we say that a painter can paint a cobbler, a carpenter, or any other craftsman, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter and displays his painting of a carpenter at a distance, he can deceive children and foolish people into thinking that it is truly a carpenter” (598b8–c4; trans. Grube/Reeve). The imitator’s creation of a likeness, Plato warns, is often accompanied by the attempt to pretend that what has been created is no mere likeness at all, but the real McCoy.

To return to the *Statesman*, it is clear from the outset that the first and most basic idea of imitation is at work in the Stranger’s argument. For his account of non-ideal regimes turns, after all, on a distinction between *good* and *bad* imitations, or as he later puts it, between those second best regimes that “imitate well” the ideal rule (καλῶς [...] μιμήσεσθαι, 301a1–2) and those less attractive regimes that imitate it “all badly” (παγκάκως, 300e1). This ranking of imitations of the ideal with reference to their relative desirability suggests that the Stranger is thinking of non-ideal regimes as imitations in the sense that they, somehow and with a varying degree of success, produce a likeness of their ideal model. Now, the suggestion that the lawless regimes under ignorant and morally corrupted rulers produce a very low-quality likeness of the ideal, knowledge-based regime is of course not surprising. But it has been the source of some puzzlement in the literature how exactly, on the Stranger’s theory, the law-abiding regimes are supposed to do any better. After all, his main claim in the dialogue is that *only* rule by an expert statesman constitutes correct rule—and that requirement is by definition not met in either of the two kinds of

imitating regime. So how does the law-abiding regime manage to create a better likeness of the ideal *even without the possession of expertise*?⁴

I want to set this controversial issue aside for the moment and begin by focusing on another problem that has received far less attention. For as has sometimes been noted, the idea of likeness creation is not the only aspect of imitation at work in the argument. What sets off the entire discussion of the relation between true statesmanship and other kinds of rule is when the Stranger catches sight of a strange group of rivals crowding around the statesman (291a–b). This “chorus of politicians” is described immediately afterwards as “that belonging to the greatest magicians among the sophists and most experienced in that craft” (291c3–4), and the link between the art of sophistic and imitation is one that is well known, both to readers of the dialogue and to its participants themselves. In the *Sophist*, the dramatic predecessor to the *Statesman*, the final account of the sophist described him as someone who imitates the philosopher by “pretending to others that he knows” (*Soph.* 268a3–4; cf. 233c).⁵ In the *Statesman*, the Stranger echoes this account of sophistic as an imitation of knowledge when he refers to the statesman’s rivals as “those who make themselves out to be statesmen [οἱ προσποιῶνται μὲν εἶναι πολιτικοὶ] and convince many that they are [καὶ πείθουσι πολλούς], even though they’re far from it” (292d6–8). And the characteristic is repeated and explicitly associated with sophistic at the end of the discussion where the statesman’s rivals are described as illusionists who as “the greatest imitators and magicians [μιμητὰς καὶ γόητας] turn out to be the greatest sophists of all [μεγίστους ... τῶν σοφιστῶν σοφιστάς]” (303b8–c5).

The presence of this notion of sophistic imitation in the *Statesman* might lead to some head scratching on the part of the dialogue’s readers. To be sure, it is not difficult to see how the sense of imitation as pretense to knowledge is supposed to work in the case of political regimes that do *not* abide by the laws. For these are the cases where ignorant rulers act *as though* they were wise and, like a true statesman, put their own judgment above the laws (300d4–7).⁶

4 For the formulation and attempted solutions to this problem see Rowe 1995a, 15–18 and 2000, 233–257; Hirsch 1995, 184–189; Lane 1998, 156–161; El Murr 2014, 247; 255–256.

5 In the *Sophist* 268a–c, the Stranger, in fact, makes a distinction between (a) the sophist, who keeps to private conversation, and (b) someone who pretends to be wise in a political setting, and who must be the person referred to here as a rival to the statesman. But, as Rowe comments, in the *Sophist* “it is clearly suggested that [the latter type] is very close in type to the sophist, and the scale of the confidence trick that he plays is sufficient to explain the claim made here in the [*Statesman*] that he [...] is ‘greatest of the sophists’” (1995a, 219).

6 Cf. Hirsch 1995, 186; Rowe 2000, 246; El Murr 2014, 254.

The lawless tyrant is thus explicitly described as someone who “makes himself out as an expert [προσποιῆται ... ὥσπερ ὁ ἐπιστήμων] claiming that he must do what is best, contrary to what is written” (παρὰ τὰ γεγραμμένα, 301b10–c4). But what about the law-abiding regimes? Are they pretenders, too? It seems to be *communis opinio* among those commentators who have reflected on the question that the answer must be no. After all, as we saw, the law-abiding regimes represent a form of political rule where *no one* acts like a statesman and puts himself above the laws, as a statesman would do. So the law-abiding regimes (it is assumed) cannot be meaningfully understood as imitators in the sense of being engaged in a sophistic imitation by ‘pretending to be wise’. When law-abiding regimes are nonetheless called imitations it must be only in the first and basic sense distinguished above: that of producing a likeness of the ideal regime. Sophistic deception is the exclusive property of lawless regimes.

There is good reason to be skeptical about this widespread conclusion, however. Not only does it require of us that we take μιμουμένας (“imitating”) in 297c4 as playing different semantic roles on each side of the μέν-δέ construction it governs, which is somewhat awkward. But it also seems hard to square with the text itself. For in a number of passages the Stranger clearly indicates that he intends the idea of sophistic imitation to apply to *all* of the non-ideal regimes under consideration. First, as he initially points out what the aim of the investigation is, he says:

Necessarily, then, we must now consider in which, if any, of these [sc. kinds of rule] does expert knowledge turn out to be—practically the most difficult and important thing to acquire. For we must find it, in order to see whom we must remove from the wise king, those who make themselves out to be statesmen [οἱ προσποιοῦνται μέν εἶναι πολιτικοί] and convince many that they are, even though they’re far from it.

Plt. 292d2–8; trans. ROWE, modified

This passage suggests a division of kinds of political rule into two categories: (1) that based on true knowledge, and (2) those who imitate that kind by successfully “making themselves out to be statesmen” and must be separated off from him. This, however, leaves no room for the possibility of a kind of rule that imitates ideal rule *only* in the sense of producing a likeness of it, but which, presumably, should *also* be separated off from it in the Stranger’s *diairesis*. In other words: the Stranger must be assuming that the law-abiding regimes also somehow belong among the pretenders to be disposed of. The same point can be even more clearly made by referring to the passage where the Stranger sums

up the entire digression. Having just discussed the subcategories of *both* lawless and law-abiding regimes, he concludes:

So then we must also take away those who partake in all these kinds of rule [τοὺς κοινωνοὺς τούτων τῶν πολιτειῶν πασῶν], except for the one of the expert, as not being statesmen but experts in faction, and we must say that as presiding over the greatest of illusions [εἰδῶλων μεγίστων προστάτας], they are themselves of that sort, and that as the greatest imitators and magicians [μιμητὰς καὶ γόητας] they turn out to be the greatest sophists of all.

Plt. 303b8–c5; trans. ROWE, modified

In this passage, the people involved in law-abiding regimes—who are clearly among “those who partake in *all* these kinds of rule”—are straightforwardly included among the pretenders and impostors who imitate the statesman by wrongly making themselves out to be one. This is a problem for the general assumption, referred to above, that law-abiding regimes are only imitations in the basic sense of being somehow like the ideal. For the passage makes clear that the cases of law-abiding regimes, too, must somehow involve making oneself out to be what one is not.

How is this supposed to work? In the present chapter I will attempt to show how, on the Stranger’s theory, even regimes of the law-abiding kind can be said to pretend to be ruled on the basis of political expertise, thus making themselves out as serious rivals to the statesman. Understanding how this works will, in turn, be helpful in formulating a solution to the first problem with imitations, which I set aside above, namely the problem how law-abiding regimes, lacking expertise, can nonetheless be said to represent better imitations of the ideal.

This proposed investigation into the meaning and function of political imitations in the *Statesman* is of great importance to the main topic in this book. For, as we shall see, the notion of law-abiding imitators is one the Stranger associates closely with *democracy*. In particular, his account of a law-abiding regime’s relation to political expertise takes the form of a portrayal of a distinctively democratic society (298a–299e) that looks very much like classical Athens. However, before we can turn to see how that works out in detail, we need to return, first, to that other claim the Stranger makes about law-abiding regimes: that they are to be regarded as “second best” (297e4). A proper understanding of what is involved in this claim is crucial to understanding the law-abiding regime’s status as imitator in the sophistic sense. Or to put the point more polemically, a widespread but mistaken view of what the Stranger means by “second best” has, I believe, been instrumental in bringing about the equally

mistaken view, referred to above, that law-abiding regimes cannot possibly belong among the sophistic pretenders.

Expertise and Its Discontents

In 297e, as we saw, the law-abiding regime is presented by the Stranger as a “second best” (δεύτερον, e4), and, later, he refers to it as a “second sailing” (δεύτερος πλοῦς, 300c2). As J.B. Skemp remarks, the latter metaphor probably referred to a situation where, given the lack of favorable wind, sailing must be conducted by means of oars instead, and it was accordingly used proverbially to designate a ‘second best’ in the sense of a recommended alternative under suboptimal circumstances (1952, 209 n1). This is also how we find the phrase used by Plato in a number of well-known passages. Thus, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates famously turns to ‘forms’ and formal causation when he realizes that a teleological natural philosophy, as promised by Anaxagoras, is unavailable (*Phaed.* 99c); and in the *Laws* a strict theocratic law code is presented as a “second best” in the sense that, even if the rule of a saintly individual would be more desirable, such a law code is what we should realistically aim at, given the inevitable weakness of human moral character (*Laws* 894e–895d). In both these passages the “second sailing” refers to the speaker’s suggested alternative given certain suboptimal circumstances (respectively, the teleological poverty of Presocratic natural philosophy and human liability to moral corruption).

But then what are those suboptimal circumstances in the context of the political theory of the *Statesman*, corresponding to the lack of wind in the case of sailing? Most commentators have simply assumed that the Stranger has in mind the fundamentally utopian nature of the figure of the statesman himself, that is, the unavailability of anyone who truly meets the requirements for true statesmanship. Truly expert statesmen, it is assumed, are rare birds indeed. So if cities cannot get their hands on one of them, the Stranger claims, the next best thing for them to do is to opt for a political regime that sticks closely to the laws. Note, crucially, how this view has implications for how we make sense of the second best regime as an instance of ‘imitation’. If what makes circumstances suboptimal is taken to be simply the absence of a statesman, then it would seem strange if the “second best”—the Stranger’s *recommended* alternative—should be a regime that also ‘imitates’ in the sense of sophistically pretending to be a rule by expert knowledge. Surely, the Stranger would not recommend *that*. Rather, we would presumably expect his second best to be a regime that only ‘imitates’ the ideal in the sense of adopting one or more of its features as far as possible while still acknowledging the exclusive authority of

a true expert and not attempting to usurp his throne. That is how Melissa Lane understands it: “the second best states cope with their lack of a political expert by sticking unwaveringly to their laws *unless and until one should appear*” (Lane 1998, 147; my emphasis; cf. 158). There is no room, here, for the ‘second best’ as a pretender. The Stranger’s second best regime, rather, must be one that rigidly follows the laws while it piously awaits the advent of its savior.

But I think we should resist taking the notion of the “second best” in the *Statesman* in this way. To begin, it is important to observe that the question of the utopian nature and realistic prospects of a true expert statesman is in fact never addressed directly in the dialogue. As Malcolm Schofield observes, the theoretical and abstract discussion of the *Statesman*, in marked contrast with the *Republic*, says next to nothing about the actual coming-to-be or education of the knowledgeable ruler.⁷ The Stranger, to be sure, does emphasize the point that such expertise is very unlikely to be found in the population at large and should rather be conceived of as the possession of a single specialized individual (297b). But this is a purely theoretical point about the nature of political expertise; he says nothing about the availability of *such an individual expert*. When commentators have nonetheless been tempted to see the Stranger’s reference to a “second best” as motivated by a worry about the availability of a true expert, they are, I venture to guess, guided more by their familiarity with other dialogues, in particular the *Republic*, than by the discussion in the *Statesman* itself.

Moreover, two interrelated considerations make it very unlikely that the Stranger’s worry is simply about finding an individual that meets the required standard of political expertise. Firstly, the discussion of law-abiding political rule as a ‘second best’ is introduced, a few lines earlier, as the attempt to “point out a mistake [*ἀμάρτημα*] that is currently made” (297c8–d1). This fits badly with the common reading. For on that reading it is very difficult to see how anyone can reasonably be said to do anything wrong here. If what the Stranger is doing were simply to offer us his recommended alternative given the unlikelihood of a true statesman, presumably he would not refer to that alternative as a *mistake*? After all, assuming there is currently no true statesman available, sticking to the laws would be the right thing to do (until one did become available). Secondly, as we shall presently see, the common reading has a very hard time making sense of the subsequent discussion. “Let us”, the Stranger suggests at this point, “go through the way in which what we have called ‘second best’ has come to be” (297e5–6). But the account that follows

7 Schofield 2006, 174.

is manifestly not a description of a city that piously adheres to its laws “unless and until” a true expert comes along. Rather, it is a regime that has plenty of experts but which actively rejects them.

Let us take a closer look at how this plays out. The Stranger proceeds by way of a comic caricature or fable, using an analogy with what is by now two well-known technical crafts, seafaring and medicine. We should imagine that we became outraged at “the most terrible things” (δεινότατα) done to us by steersmen and doctors and, as a result, decided to make the exercise of these crafts a matter of following rigid and unchangable rules laid down by a popular assembly, where everybody regardless of background can contribute their opinion (298a1–299e5). My introductory summary given here is deliberately vague for much hinges on how we understand what exactly goes on here. In particular, the literature has been characterized by some confusion as to why ‘we’ are thought to become dissatisfied with the steersmen and doctors in the fable: what is wrong with these experts? The Stranger says:

Let’s suppose that we all thought of them [steersmen and doctors] as doing the most terrible things to us. For each saves whichever of us they are willing to save, and whichever they wish to mutilate they cut and burn and order us to pay them as if it were taxes, of which they spend little or none on the patient, while they themselves and their household use the rest; and the final step is for them to accept money from relatives or some enemies of the patient as pay for killing him. And steersmen, for their part, bring about a thousand other things of a similar kind, leaving people stranded on voyages as a result of some conspiracy or other, causing problems on the sea and throwing cargo overboard, and doing other malicious things.

Plt. 298a1–b7; trans. ROWE, modified

Readers of the dialogue have sometimes been tempted to interpret the ‘problem’ described here as that of the immoral misuse of expertise. Melissa Lane, for instance, writes:

The Stranger asks Young Socrates to imagine that ‘we’ all believed ourselves abused by pilots and doctors, subject to their arbitrary wielding of power, harmful treatment, and corruption. With such motivating beliefs, we might decide no longer to allow these experts to rule unfettered [...], but instead to let an assembly of the *dēmos* make laws to govern them.

LANE 1998, 154

The perceived problem, as it is presented by Lane, should be understood in terms of all-powerful, but corrupted experts: the sailors and doctors, who are imagined to wield dictatorial power (“rule unfettered”, her gloss on ἄρχειν αὐτοκράτορι in 298c1), misuse their skill and knowledge for bad ends instead of good.⁸ Accordingly, the city decides that they cannot be allowed to use their expertise as they want and that laws must be introduced to “govern” them. Note that on this reading of the fable it is assumed that the experts’ failure is not one of expertise or knowledge. The steersmen and doctors are unproblematically seen to possess and exercise genuine expertise in their respective fields; the problem is simply that they do so for bad and wicked ends.

This reading of the imagined situation in the fable might initially seem to find support in the passage cited above. For there the Stranger explains “the terrible things done to us” by pointing out that the experts “save whichever of us they are willing to save, and whichever they wish to mutilate they cut and burn [...]” (298a2–5), which seems to suggest that the problem is primarily one of being at the mercy of the dictatorial use of expertise. But if so, then there is a conspicuous discrepancy between this problem and the city’s subsequent response to it, as described in the lines that follow. If the problem were immoral misuse of expertise, we would expect the rules established by the assembly to be rules that governed how the experts *use* their skills, that is, the ends and purposes for which they exercise them. This seems to be what Lane suggests when she contrasts this regime with the “unfettered rule” of experts. But it is not what the Stranger in fact describes the city as doing:

Let’s then suppose that we thought this about them, and came to a conclusion in a sort of council, no longer to allow either of these kinds of expertise to rule independently over either slaves or free men, but to call together an assembly consisting of ourselves, either the whole people or only the rich, and that it be permitted both to laymen and to the other craftsmen to contribute an opinion about sailing and diseases, about how one uses drugs and medical instruments on patients, and how ships and nautical instruments are used for sailing, and regarding both the dangers affecting the voyage itself from winds and sea and to encounters with pirates, and in cases where it’s somehow necessary to fight a sea battle with long ships against others of the same type.

Plt. 298b7–d5; trans. ROWE, modified

8 For this interpretation see also e.g. Guthrie 1978, 186; Rosen 1995, 172; Cuomo 2007, 31; Ricken 2008, 196.

What the Stranger describes here is a city that decides, on the basis of deliberation in a popular assembly, what should qualify as the exercise of a particular art or expertise as such. Laymen and experts in other fields are all allowed “to contribute an opinion about sailing and diseases”, and the rules established on this basis concern the technical performance of the crafts: “how one uses drugs and medical instruments on patients, and how ships and nautical instruments are used for sailing”, how to deal with winds and sea, or how to conduct a battle with triremes. In other words, what the assembly in the fable decides is not for what *ends* experts should use their craft, but what specific procedures and practices *make* someone an expert in the first place.⁹ As the Stranger later says, the city bans investigation by individuals into crafts and expert knowledge and denies the very title of expert to whoever fails to practice navigation and medicine along the exact and inflexible lines laid down by the people (299b2–8). This, of course, is the reason why the whole fable is recognized by Young Socrates to be such an absurd story (298e4), and why he can exclaim with horror that it would be “the ruin of all crafts” (299e6–10). For how can it be anything but absurd to let an assembly decide what works and what does not work in sailing and medicine and to codify this into rigid laws? On the other hand, if the Stranger had merely been saying that the ends for which sailors and doctors exercise their crafts come to be regulated by an assembly, there would really be nothing absurd about it. Presumably, experts *are* often, if not always, regulated in that way. But to say that a sailor must not use his expertise to harm people is not to claim that he ceases to be an expert sailor if he does so. The fable is provocative precisely because the popular assembly is entirely free to decide, and lay down as inflexible laws, what counts as expert knowledge.

So, we seem to be left with a discrepancy between the perceived problem presented in the opening lines of the Stranger’s fable (298a1–b7) and the response undertaken by the city (298b7–e3). If the problem is that experts misuse their expert knowledge for bad ends, then it is not at all clear how making the content of expert knowledge into a matter of popular decision is supposed to help. For, presumably, even if a sailor followed the written laws about how one sails a ship and how one uses “nautical instruments”, he could still do so with better or worse intentions and for better or worse ends. I can conduct the art of sailing my oil tanker in the way specified by the assembly, but do so with the malevolent aim of ramming your rubber dinghy.

9 Skemp: “... a society which rules by law that each particular art shall consist in certain specific processes performed in a specific manner” (1952, 48).

How can this discrepancy in the Stranger's fable be reconciled? I suggest that the key to a solution lies in understanding better the initial problem (298a1–b7) to which the city responds by making expertise a matter of democratically established law. We should note two things about the way the Stranger presents this problem. First, he makes sure to clearly flag that what he describes is what the city takes or understands the experts to be doing: the account is circumscribed by explicit statements to the effect that this is what “we believe” to be happening (περὶ αὐτῶν διανοηθεῖμεν, 298a1; ταῦτα διανοηθέντες, b7). This emphasis on the subjective character of the account of the problem explains the apparent contrast between that account and the strikingly positive epithets (“noble,” “worthy”) with which the Stranger reintroduces the steersman and the doctor in the lines immediately before (297e11–12). There is, we are made to understand, a significant gap between the actual character of the experts and the way they are thought to be by the city. The experts, described by the Stranger in the account of the ‘problem’, are *good* experts, who are, however, *perceived* to be doing terrible things.

What accounts for this gap between reality and popular perception in the case of the experts? There is another interesting observation to be made about the way the Stranger reintroduces the steersman and the doctor as stand-ins for his political expert:

Eleatic Stranger: Let's return again to those images with which we must necessarily [ἀναγκαῖον] always compare the kingly rulers.

Young Socrates: What images?

Eleatic Stranger: The noble steersman along with the doctor “worth as much as many others”. Let's observe a situation these could be imagined to find themselves in.

Plt. 297e8–13

In this passage the Stranger highlights something that has, until now, not been explicit in his argument. His consistent preference for the comparison of political expertise with the arts of sailing and medicine, he says, is not simply a matter of arbitrary choice. In other words, he could not just have chosen any old expertise—house-building or fluteplaying—to do the job. Political expertise “must necessarily” (ἀναγκαῖον) be understood in analogy with sailing and medicine in particular. But what makes these two kinds of expertise special? I want to point to two things about them that I take to be important for understanding what goes in the Stranger's account.

First of all, in antiquity (as for much of human history) the exercise of both sailing and medicine was characteristically undertaken under conditions of

great danger and uncertainty. Socrates taps into the Greeks' deep-seated and widespread deference for the sea when he says, in the spurious *Axiochus*, that "terrestrial man throws himself onto the sea as if he were amphibious, and is entirely at the mercy of chance" (*Ax.* 368b7–c1; trans. Herschbell), and the same sentiment is found in the *Laws*, where the Athenian Stranger explicitly singles out the arts of medicine and sailing as prime examples of human activities that, despite the presence of skill and insight, are inevitably exposed to uncontrollable and unforeseen circumstances and contingencies (*Laws* 709a–c). Though the Greeks, of course, knew the value of good steersmen and navigators, the capriciousness of the sea meant that often the presence of an expert could not be expected to guarantee success the way it could in other fields of expertise. Even under expert supervision the crossing of the sea was riddled with uncertainty to a degree that was incomparable with having a house built or providing flute music for a symposium. Secondly, given the extreme and critical situations that often accompanied the exercise of sailing and medicine in antiquity, it was an unavoidable element of both that they frequently required accepting a lesser but immediate evil for the sake of a greater, long-term good. Doctors were known to apply ill-tasting medicine or, in critical cases, even to subject the patient to painful and risky surgery; and it is telling that Aristotle's example of someone forced by the circumstances to do something bad for the sake of something better is the steersman on the sea who must jettison the cargo in a storm in order to save himself and the passengers (*N.E.* 1110a8–11). Of course, however, it remained the case that even if these unpleasant measures were adopted, there was still no guarantee that everything would turn out well.

These reflections on the exceptional character of the Stranger's preferred analogies serve, I think, to explain the gap between (1) how the experts really are ("noble", "worthy"), and (2) how they are perceived to be by the city. In 296a–d the Stranger has already given a hint that "the many" are very likely to misunderstand the nature of political expertise in this respect. They are, he says, like patients who think that, because they do not find agreeable the medical treatment being applied, that treatment must constitute "a unhealthy mistake contrary to expertise" and that they themselves are made to suffer "unhealthy things that do not belong to the expertise" (νοσώδη καὶ ἄτεχνα, c2). But they are "ridiculous", according to the Stranger, because they do not realize that political expertise, like medicine, is an expertise that sometimes requires the practitioner to apply such unpleasant measures. This seems to be the situation, too, in our passage on the experts in 298a–b. For note that among the ways the doctors are there thought to do "terrible things" is by their mutilation of the patients by "cutting and burning" them (a4–5). But cutting and burn-

ing were, in fact, a form of medical treatment that was in antiquity a common and recognized (if feared) part of the doctor's repertoire (cf. 293a2–3).¹⁰ Likewise, among the “terrible things” the steersmen are perceived to do are “leaving people stranded on voyages” and “throwing cargo overboard” (b4–6), both of which were presumably something a steersman's expertise would, in critical situations, require him to do (for instance, if to remain anchored by the coast or to keep the ship fully loaded would be too risky). But, crucially, these genuine expert procedures are not understood as such by the city. Rather, they are interpreted, wrongly, as “terrible things done to us”. What the Stranger's fable asks us to imagine, it seems, is the strange case of a city that does not understand the exceptional nature and circumstances of expertises like medicine and sailing: a city where the expert doctor's use of painful surgery is wrongly interpreted as intentional mutilation, and the steersman's jettison of the cargo is taken to be the result of a conspiracy. This explanation can be extended to cover the entire description of the experts in 298a–b. For the failure to appreciate that extraordinary danger and uncertainty are necessary concomitants of the exercise of these particular arts explains the remaining “terrible things” the experts are thought to commit: if in sailing and medicine we wrongly expect the same success rate as in, say, house-building and flute playing, how will we explain the frequent casualties associated with seafaring and with medical treatment other than by putting them down as the result of malevolence on the part of the practitioners? If we hold a mistaken view of what the arts of medicine and sailing should properly involve and be capable of, our perception of what expert doctors and steersmen do *qua* experts will be equally distorted.

This understanding of what goes on in the passage on the experts is different from the traditional interpretation in a crucial respect. On the traditional interpretation, as we saw, the city does not question the epistemic credentials of the steersman and the doctor. These experts are straightforwardly assumed to possess and exercise genuine expert knowledge; the problem is simply that they do so for bad ends. In other words: the city has no problem with the notion itself that there exist individual experts with exclusive expert knowledge. But on the reading proposed here, the city is in fact very likely to have a problem with this notion. For if its perception of what the experts are doing stems from an underlying misconception of what this kind of expertise should look like in the first place, then every genuine expert exercising his expertise will

10 Cf. *Gorg.* 456b3–4; 505a6–9; 521e6–522a1 (and the last section of the previous chapter on that dialogue); Edelstein 1987, 365–366; Yunis 1996, 129–130.

systematically be rejected by it as “doing terrible things”. This means, in turn, that the city will never actually have met an individual expert who seems to fit the bill. So-called ‘doctors’, the city reasons, never consistently act the way a doctor is supposed to. ‘They all just hurt us by cutting and burning’, we can imagine the people complaining, ‘and—look!—their patients die all the time!’

When the possibility of a genuine expert being perceived as one is thus ruled out from the outset due to misguided expectations, it is, I take it, not implausible to expect that the city comes to assume that there *are* no real experts, i.e. that everyone who claims to be one is simply a charlatan who does not know what he is doing. In fact, this is a step the Stranger describes the city as taking. For when, in a later passage, he briefly recapitulates the account from 298a–b (this time leaving out the analogy with sailing and medicine), he explicitly has the people question even the very possibility of genuine experts as such:

People found the notion of that single ruler of ours hard to stomach, and refused to believe that there would ever be anyone who deserved to rule in such way, so as to be willing *and able* [καὶ δυνάτὸν] to rule with virtue *and expert knowledge* [καὶ ἐπιστήμης], distributing what is just and right correctly to all, but they think that on every occasion [ἐκάστοτε] such a person mutilates, kills and generally maltreats whichever of us he wishes.

Plt. 301c9–d3; trans. ROWE, modified and with my emphasis

Here, the people of the city are led to conclude not only that every so-called ‘expert’ is liable to moral corruption, but also, contrary to the traditional interpretation, that he does not really have the expert knowledge he claims to have.

Importantly, if we understand the perceived problem with the experts along the lines I have suggested here, the city’s subsequent response to that problem becomes intelligible. For if the city’s conclusion is that all that is ever presented as expertise by ‘doctors’ and ‘steersmen’ involves suffering “terrible things” (as if it were nothing but the machinations of charlatans), then the problem to be addressed becomes an epistemic one: it is the problem that there really seems to be no genuine expertise to be found among the individuals who claim to be experts. In having a popular assembly decide and put into rigid law the specific contents and procedures of medicine and sailing, thus, the city’s response does suit the perceived problem it was intended to deal with. It ensures that medicine and sailing is always practised along lines that are acceptable to the general populace on their own benighted standards, instead of what was, due to a mistaken view of those arts, perceived as mere charlatanism.

In following sections below I will investigate more closely how this alternative, ‘democratic’ conception of expertise is to be understood. Before turning to that task, however, I want to point out how the above reading returns us to the question of law-abiding rule as a “second best sailing”. For the situation described in the account of the experts provides us with an alternative, and attractive, candidate for the condition that makes the law-abiding regime a “second best”. On the reading favoured by most commentators, what makes the Stranger recommend that regime as “second best” is the unlikelihood of a true expert statesman. On the alternative reading I propose, what he has in mind is rather the fact that the notion of such an expert *is widely rejected by society*. In other words, the unfortunate circumstance—corresponding to the lack of wind in the ‘second sailing’ metaphor—that leads the Stranger to recommend a political rule that sticks to the laws is that society generally fails to understand what true political expertise requires and accordingly rejects the expert’s procedures and instructions as harmful. Note that this ‘no wind condition’, unlike the unavailability of a statesman, can reasonably be referred to by the Stranger as involving a “mistake” (ἀμάρτημα, 297d1). For it is, he insists throughout, a mistake to think of political expertise in the way people generally think of it. But it is nonetheless the case that they do think about it in this way, and given such regrettable circumstances the second best would be for the city to be governed in strict accordance with the laws. This reading finds support in the text in 297e: the law-abiding regime, the Stranger says, is “most right and fine, as a second best, *whenever someone changes the first principle* discussed just now” (ἐπειδὴν τὸ πρῶτόν τις μεταθῇ τὸ νυνδὴ ῥηθέν, e3–5).¹¹ The condition under which the law-abiding regime is the best alternative is not so much that there happens to be no statesman around; it is the fact that people are likely to actively reject the notion of rule by such a statesman.

One last passage needs to be considered in light of this conclusion. This is the later passage, cited above, where the Stranger states that the non-ideal regimes have come to be because people found the notion of an expert ruler “hard to stomach” and “refused to believe” that he could exist (301c6–d3). In itself, this clearly supports my reading: the whole issue of better or worse non-ideal

11 Common translations have a tendency to conceal the temporal-reiterative sense of ἐπειδὴν (“whenever”) and/or the third-person subject (τις, “someone”), e.g. Jowett (“... if you set aside the first, of which I was just now speaking ...”); Skemp (“... when the ideal we have just described has been set aside ...”); Rowe (“... when one changes the principle we discussed just now ...”).

regimes, the Stranger seems to suggest, is premised on people's rejection of expert rule, not the unavailability of an expert ruler. However, the Stranger then goes on to add, in the immediately following lines, that a true expert statesman would nonetheless be "highly valued" (ἀγαπᾶσθαι) if he "were to come to be" (γενόμενον γ' ἂν, d4–6). Is the Stranger here suggesting, confusingly, that the people would suddenly forget their scruples and welcome a true statesman if he should appear? This is how the passage is understood by Melissa Lane, who sees in it evidence of a separate type of 'second best' city that, unlike the city of the thought experiment, is able to overcome its qualms and accept the notion of an expert ruler (1998, 161–163).¹² But she is only able to do so at the cost of playing down what seems to be clear echoes of the thought experiment in the Stranger's description of the people's aversion to expert rule in c9–d3.¹³ If the Stranger were at this point introducing a new type of law-abiding city, significantly different from the city of the thought experiment, we would surely expect him to clearly flag this break with what has gone before, rather than risk confusion by describing it in very similar language. Hence, it seems preferable to go, instead, in the other direction and attempt to read the Stranger's remark in d4–6 in a way that is compatible with what he has just said about the people's antipathy toward the notion of expert rule. The best way to do so, I believe, would be to take him to be making a hypothetical point. What he is pointing out is simply that if people *were* enlightened enough to allow for expert rule, they *would* appreciate it (taking ἐπεὶ γενόμενον γ' ἂν in d4 as "if a kingly ruler were to be [allowed in power]").¹⁴ The Stranger's remark, then, is not opening up the possibility of existing cities actually welcoming a

12 Lane also points out in support of this reading that none of the law-abiding (and lawless) cities discussed in 302b–303b are explicitly said to ban investigation into the *technai* in the way done by the city in the thought experiment (1998, 61). This, however, only has the weight of an *ex silentio* argument. In fact, in the context of the discussion in 302b–303b it is not obvious why the Stranger would explicitly mention such a ban. He is at this point concerned with comparing the different forms of non-ideal regimes with each other, not with the ideal regime. So the attitude of law-abiding cities to *technē* is less relevant.

13 First passage (thought experiment): "whichever [of us] they wish to mutilate they mutilate" (ὅν δ' ἂν λωβᾶσθαι βουληθῶσιν, λωβῶνται, 298a2–4); "they kill" (ἀποκτεινύασιν, b3); "they do other malicious things" (κακοῦργοῦσιν, b7). Second passage: "on every occasion such a person also mutilates, kills and generally maltreats whichever of us he wishes" (λωβᾶσθαι δὲ καὶ ἀποκτεινύει καὶ κακοῦν ὃν ἂν βουληθῇ ἐκάστοτε ἡμῶν, 301d2–3).

14 Versions of this suggestion are found in Rowe 1995a, 233; and Ricken 2008, 204. It seems to be implied by El Murr (2014, 259).

statesman. Rather, his remark is simply a comment on how people's stubborn resistance to expert rule is ultimately not in their own best interest: if only they knew how much they would enjoy living under the government of a true statesman.

Democratic Expertise

By imagining a democratic society that decides to make expert knowledge a matter of democratic deliberation and legislation in a popular assembly, the Stranger's fable invokes a theme that runs as a main current through much of Plato's thought and which has also already surfaced in the *Statesman*: that of democracy's relation to knowledge and expertise. Even though Socrates the elder remains silent throughout the dialogue, one of its main points, laid instead in the mouth of the Stranger, is distinctively Socratic: none of the various criteria people traditionally use to evaluate a political regime—the number of rulers, popular consent, and adherence by the laws—are essential to whether a city is ruled in the correct way (292a–c). Rather, the sole defining trait (τὸν ὀρθόν, c5) of correct rule is that it is based on *expert knowledge* (*epistēmē*) or *expertise* (*technē*). Just as the question of whether a doctor's treatment is correct is alone a matter of whether he acts with the proper expertise in medicine, so the correctness of political rule, too, is alone a matter of whether it is based on the expert knowledge of the true statesman (293a–e).

As in a number of other dialogues, this identification of correct political rule with rule by knowledge is explicitly presented as, in particular, a challenge to democracy. For although the number of rulers as such is not what defines correct rule, it is nonetheless clear that the Stranger's view has implications for the promises of a political system like that of contemporary Athens. The “truest criterion of correct management of the city”, the Stranger says, “by which the wise and good man manages what belongs to those being ruled” is whether or not what he does is to their advantage (296e1–4). But knowing what is advantageous is the exclusive domain of expert knowledge. Examples are given by means of our two well-known and characteristically Platonic analogies: it is the doctor who, in virtue of his expertise, knows what is for the benefit of the health of his patients (b6–7), and it is the expert steersman who best “watches out for what is to the benefit of the ship and the sailors” (e4–297a1). But, as Young Socrates is made to agree over and again,

No great mass of people [πλῆθος] of any kind would ever be able to acquire this kind of expert knowledge and run a city with reason. We must look

instead within a small element in the population—to a few or to the one—to find the right kind of rule.

Plt. 297b7–c1; trans. SCHOFIELD 2006, modified

The implication is damning to democracy. If correct rule is rule of knowledge and the majority can never acquire such knowledge, a rule by the many can never constitute correct rule.¹⁵

As we saw in the Introduction above, the opposition of knowledge and democracy, on which this argument turns, is a Socratic classic. Political and ethical knowledge, so goes the central Socratic assumption, takes the same form as specialized crafts and expertise: it is the exclusive property of the talented and trained individual. If anything, the idea of technical exclusivity is in fact even more strongly emphasized in the *Statesman* than in the Socratic dialogues. Just as you would find very few top draughts players among a thousand men, so you can never expect the many to be able to acquire expert knowledge in ruling (292e). But while the *Statesman* thus confirms and accentuates the contrast between democracy and expertise, it does not treat it in the same truistic fashion. In the Stranger's fable, as we saw, we are presented with the portrayal of a democratic society that, unlike the Socrates of earlier dialogues, does *not* see political expertise as necessarily opposed to, and incompatible with, its own political system. In fact, as we shall see in more detail, although the fable is clearly presented as a caricature meant to suggest the absurdity of the democratic practice, it also contains hints as to what a distinctively democratic conception of political knowledge might look like.

Let us turn to a closer investigation of the city described in the fable. The description of the city and its response to the problem of experts is packed with references to traditional democratic practice, as Plato knew it from the Athens of his time: the highest political authority lies with a popular assembly (ἐκκλησίαν, 298c2) where everyone regardless of background (cf. ἰδιωτῶν, 298c4; d6) is allowed to “contribute his opinion” (γνώμην συμβαλέσθαι) and partake in deliberation (298c5); public office-holders are chosen by lot (κληρούμενος λαγχάνη, e7; 299a1; 300a3) and subject to popular audit (εὐθύνειν, 299a2). The Stranger even alludes to the terminology of Athenian legislation (τὰ ... τῷ πλήθει δόξαντα, 298d5)¹⁶ and law courts (γραφάμενον εἰσάγειν τὸν βουλόμενον,

15 This antidemocratic conclusion is reflected in the Stranger's frequent equation of political expertise with “the art of kingship” (e.g. 292b6; e9; 294a6; b4; 300e7).

16 The official enactment formula was “Ἐδοξε τῷ δήμῳ (cf. previous chapter). For *plēthos* as a synonym for *dēmos* in Athenian political discourse see Sinclair 1988, 17.

299c2–3),¹⁷ and satirizes, more generally, the marked litigiousness for which democratic Athens was notorious (298e11–299a7; c2–3).¹⁸

It is, however, important to note that inserted in a number of places throughout this strong invocation of Athenian political life are indications that the Stranger also has an oligarchic rule in mind (an exclusive council of the rich: 298c3, e6; juror selection by preselection among the rich: 298e13–299a1; election instead of the lot: 300a3; cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1294b8–9). The Stranger's idea seems to be that insofar as an oligarchic rule behaves like the democracy he describes, the point made in the fable might apply to it too. But as Skemp notes, he quickly seems to “forget about the oligarchic alternative and thinks only of Athens” (Skemp 1952, 204 n2). When the city described in these lines so clearly recalls democratic Athens, it is surely because the account is meant to illustrate and parody a political reality Plato associated, first and foremost, with his home city and other *poleis* with similar systems. But, for reasons that will become clear later, we should bear in mind the oligarchic alternative that lurks beneath the surface.

In the Stranger's caricature of democratic society, as we saw, the decisions made about medicine and sailing are what the city now takes to be the standards of such expertise:

The decisions of the majority [τὰ δὲ τῷ πλῇθει δόξαντα] about these things [medicine and seafaring], made under the advice of doctors and steersmen and laymen alike, they write down on tablets and blocks of stone, or, in other cases, establish as unwritten ancestral customs, and for all future time sailing or caring for patients is done in accordance with these.

Plt. 298d5–e3

Translated into political terms, the Stranger's analogy gives us the familiar notion of rule by the majority. A democratic city, no one would be surprised to learn, decides what to do on the basis of popular approval. But what is important to note here is that the democratic city in the Stranger's fable takes its decisions about medicine and seafaring to constitute a body of general rules that prescribes how these crafts are to be carried out. It is not a matter of deciding whether course A or B is how we should go about sailing or healing

¹⁷ Cf. Hansen 1991, 359–365. For the reference in the *Statesman*: Rowe 1995a, 229.

¹⁸ For the many references to Athens and Athenian democracy throughout the discussion see Dusanic 1995.

in a particular situation; it is a matter of deciding on rules and standards that specifies the content of how one properly sails and heals “for all future time”.

To see what is significant about the Stranger’s account of the democratic attitude to expertise it is helpful to recall another, more famous, portrayal of the expert as a knowledgeable steersman and his role in a democracy: the ‘ship of state’ analogy from book 6 of the *Republic*. In that passage, Socrates explains why the wise philosopher, despite his knowledge, is commonly assumed to be utterly useless. A democratic city, Socrates says, is like a ship where a violent and brawling bunch of ignorant sailors (democratic politicians) contend with each other in an attempt to persuade, in whatever way possible, the equally ignorant ship-owner (the people) to put them in control. When victory in this game of opportunism and cynicism becomes the mark of success, the genuine expert knowledge of the true steersman comes to seem useless and he is himself dismissed as “a stargazer, a babbler, and a useless fellow” (μετεωροσκόπον τε καὶ ἀδολέσχην καὶ ἄχρηστόν, *Resp.* 488e3–489a1). But while democracy and its practitioners thus reject the true expert and his knowledge, it does not seem that they have anything to put in his place. The sailors do not claim that what the ship-owner decides constitutes viable rules or standards for sailing. Rather, far from representing a rival vision of what knowledge of navigation might be, the democratic system’s attitude to expertise is depicted (very much in line with the main concerns of the *Republic*) as simply a function of the corruption of society’s moral character. As Malcolm Schofield rightly points out, “all that matters to the ignorant sailors [...] who contend with each other for control of the vessel is *getting* control. How to steer it once they have control is not anything that figures in their concerns, and they have no conception of what navigation might be like” (2006, 123). In the *Republic*, democratic politics is concerned with power and gratification, not knowledge.

The fable in the *Statesman*, in fact, contains a passage that clearly echoes the *Republic*’s description of the attitude to expert knowledge in a democratic society.¹⁹ But this time democracy’s treatment of the expert is not portrayed as the result of a moral corruption. Rather, the city of the Stranger’s fable is presented as making a conscious and rational attempt at reconciling its political rule with a claim to be ruled by knowledge:

Moreover, [the city] will necessarily establish a law against all the following: if anyone is found looking into seafaring or sailing, or health and the truth of medicine, concerning winds and heat and cold, contrary to the

19 For this comparison see also Schofield 2006, 122–124.

written rules, and making speculations of any kind about these things, in the first place he must not be called a doctor or a steersman, but a stargazer, some babbling sophist [μετεωρολόγον, ἀδολέσχην τινὰ σοφιστήν]; and then that anyone who can and wishes to should accuse him and bring him before some court or other for corrupting other, younger people and inducing them to engage in the arts of navigation or medicine not in accordance with the law, but rather to take independent control [αὐτοκράτορας ἄρχειν] of ships and patients; and if he is found guilty of persuading anyone, young or old, contrary to the laws and written rules, he must suffer the harshest punishments. For nothing can be wiser than the laws [οὐδὲν γὰρ δεῖν τῶν νόμων εἶναι σοφώτερον]; for no one is ignorant [ἄγνοεῖν] about medicine and health, or about navigation or sailing, since it is possible for anyone who wishes to learn what is written and has been established as ancestral customs.

Plt. 299b2–d2; trans. ROWE, modified

The philosophical investigator described here clearly recalls the true steersman from the *Republic*. In both dialogues the expert is denied political rule and his reflections on the truth of things bring only ridicule and a reputation for being “a stargazer” who offers only “babble”. However, in the *Statesman*, this does not mean that democracy gives up on the possibility of ruling with political expert knowledge. Rather, the rejection of independent experts is now supplemented by what is presented as an alternative conception of what such knowledge looks like. No one, the city assumes, is without knowledge (“ignorant”) who practices expertise in accordance with the collectively established laws.²⁰ These laws, in other words, represent a body of political expert knowledge on the basis of which the city is governed. This, moreover, means that the expert is no longer the pitiable fool who is dismissed as useless because he appears utterly unable to compete with the others for control of the ‘ship’. His Socratic claim to political expert knowledge comes to represent a direct rival to what democracy takes knowledge to be and threatens to undermine its epistemic justification. Hence, as the Stranger chillingly prophesies (recalling the personification of law in 294b–c), on the conviction that “nothing can be wiser

20 Gill is thus being inaccurate when he claims that the Stranger is describing a society that believes “that there is no objective [political expertise]” (1995, 297). The city does think there is such an expertise, namely in the form of the knowledge embodied in the laws. The laws specify the procedures that *constitute* this kind of expertise. What the city denies is, more specifically, the notion that political expertise is something to be found in the knowledge of individual, ‘independent’ experts (like Socrates).

than the laws” the very idea of *exclusive* political expert knowledge comes to be perceived as a threat, and the city ends up executing genuine philosophical investigators, like Socrates.²¹

The Laws and Democratic Ideology

How should we understand the nature of the ‘democratic knowledge’ to which the city in the fable appeals? It is helpful to approach this question by considering another issue that has been raised about this passage from the *Statesman*. As we saw, the Stranger’s description of democratic society in the fable clearly recalls the Athens of Plato’s time. But, despite the many similarities in institutions and terminology, Melissa Lane has warned against taking the fable as a portrayal of any recognizable Athenian reality. For as she points out “the Athenian *dēmos* never regarded its laws in a way remotely like [in the fable]: its collective political agency meant that laws and decisions were frequently overturned”, and this ongoing process of contestation and renegotiation is, she holds, incompatible with the Stranger’s description of the democratically established laws in the fable as being “fixed ‘for all future time’” (Lane 1998, 154–155; cf. 160–161). Given modern assumptions about the strict separation of powers, it is natural to follow Lane in seeing an apparent contradiction between a rule of fixed laws, on the one side, and a rule by a sovereign *dēmos*, on the other. Surely, the *dēmos*, gathering regularly on the Pnyx, could not truly hold *kratos* if a fixed set of laws were to have the last word? So how can we talk of Athenian democracy in the case of a system where, as the Stranger later puts it, “neither an individual *nor* a *majority* [μήτε πλῆθος] is allowed to do anything contrary to [the laws]” (300c2–3)?

However, instead of leading us to downplay the obvious allusions to Athenian democracy in the fable (as they do for Lane) these considerations should prompt us to ask what aspect of Athenian history it is intended to capture. For although Lane’s characterization of the *dēmos*’ attitude to law might be accurate for the golden days of fifth century Athens, there was a time when popular rule in fact coexisted in Athens with the ascription of highest political authority to a stable set of laws. After the disasters of the Peloponnesian War, the democracy that was restored in 403/2 saw itself as very different from that of

21 Lane denies the allusion to Socrates here on the grounds that “Athens had no such law against investigation, nor was Socrates charged with breaking such a law” (1998, 154). However, the point is not so much the law itself, but the idea that this kind of city would perceive someone like Socrates as a threat. Cf. Michelini 2000, 192 n45.

Pericles' time: the Athenians decided that from now on they "should govern themselves in accordance with the custom of the ancestors [κατὰ τὰ πάτρια] and use the laws of Solon [...] and the statutes of Draco, as they had done in the past" (Andocides *On the Mysteries* 1.83). This led them to embark on an attempt to codify the ancient and traditional laws of the city and bring them to bear on its political decision-making. The result was what we could call a law-abiding democracy, where the decrees of the popular assembly could only be passed in consonance with the traditional laws. Decrees, though approved by a majority, could always be challenged as being in conflict with the laws by the legal action known as *graphē paranomōn*.²² Mogens Herman Hansen describes the change in attitude that characterized this new democratic system in Athens:

By [the new] provision laws became the higher norms in relation to decrees: it is a powerful testimony to the Athenian effort to recover respect for the laws. Since Ephialtes' reforms in 462 the Assembly had more and more frequently used its increased power to legislate, and the traditional sense of the priority of the laws had given way to a sense that the people in their Assembly were the highest power in the state. But in 403 the Athenians returned to the idea that the laws, not the people, must be the highest power and that the laws must be stable, even if not wholly entrenched. Demosthenes in his speech against Timocrates tells admiringly the story of the Locrians, who changed only one law in 200 years, because they had the marvelous custom that any proposal for a change of law must be made with a noose around the neck, and if the proposal was defeated the noose was drawn tight.

HANSEN 1991, 174

There is, in fact, much to recall the basic sentiment behind this law-abiding democracy of the fourth century in the account of the city in the Stranger's fable. Not only is that political system explicitly contrasted with a democracy that is *not* respectful of the laws, ruling "in violation of the laws" (παράνομως, 302e2; cf. 303a8). Also, the laws that come to count as highest political authority in the city are presented as expressions of a similar conservative respect for tradition. What the majority decides to establish as standards for expertise is, as was the case with the ancient laws of Athens, "inscribed on tablets and blocks of stone" or simply remain in the form of "unwritten ancestral customs" (ἄγραφα πάτρια [...] ἔθνη, 298d6–e1); and, likewise, the laws that are said to

22 Cf. Hansen 1991, 150–155; 205–212.

embody the wisdom of the democratic city take the form of “what has been written and established ancestral customs” (γεγραμμένα καὶ πάτρια ἔθνη κείμενα, 299c8–d1) or “the ancient customs of previous generations” (τὰ παλαιὰ τῶν προγόνων ἔθνη, 299a4–5).²³ This strong conservative sentiment, underlying the democratic rule of law, is in turn rationalized by an emphasis on the laws’ empiricist and pragmatic underpinnings. “The laws”, the Stranger says with reference to the city of the fable, are “the product of much experience [ἐκ πείρας πολλῆς], with some advisers having offered attractive advice about each issue and persuaded the majority to enact it” (300b1–4).²⁴ What the democratic city in the fable establishes as the proper procedure and exercise of political expertise is not simply any old law that happens to find support on the day, but time-honored wisdom and the accumulation of much collective experience and deliberation.²⁵

In the above citation, Hansen describes the restored democracy as ascribing “the highest power in the state” to the laws at the expense of the people. But it

23 To be sure, the similarity with the restored democracy in Athens lies, as I said, in the general sentiment and attitude to the laws, not in the technical details. For instance, in Athens the process of establishing the law code was carried out by a demotic ‘subcommittee’ of *anagrapheis* and *nomothetai* selected by lot, not by the assembly itself (as in the fable). However, in Plato’s philosophical circles this was clearly understood to make little difference for the relation between *dēmos* and laws. Thus the Platonic *Definitiones*, while upholding the fourth century contrast between *psēphismata* and *nomoi*, nonetheless straightforwardly defines *nomos* as “the political opinion of the majority [δόγμα πλῆθους πολιτικόν] established without limit of duration” (*Def.* 415b8–9). The laws, in other words, can reflect popular consensus without being the result of a majority vote in the assembly.

24 We should not take the reference to “some advisers” as suggesting that the coming-to-be of the laws was, after all, guided by experts. As Ober points out, whenever a member of the *dēmos* addressed the assembly he was said to assume the role of ‘adviser’ to the demos (1989, 317–318; cf. previous chapter). In general, I take this passage to speak strongly against Hansen’s contention that, on the Stranger’s view, the laws of non-ideal regimes in fact are the products of expert lawgivers/statesmen in the past, like Lycurgus and Solon (Hansen 2011 and 2013, 72–75). The Stranger does hint at the fact that traditional laws were conventionally associated with the names of such archaic lawgivers (cf. the Solonian tablets and blocks in 298d7), but he has no illusions about their really being the work of actual individual experts; they are, he stresses, the result of collective experience and a process of democratic deliberation. As Dodds writes about the notion of “law” in ancient Greece: “The laws represented the collective wisdom of the past; perhaps they had been codified by some great man, a Lycurgus or Solon, but they were felt to rest ultimately on an authority higher than that of an individual statesman” (1973, 98).

25 Cf. Friedländer 1975, 277; Annas and Waterfield 1995, xix–xx.

is probably more correct to say that in fourth century Athens, the moderating curtailment of the assembly's power *vis-à-vis* the traditional and established laws was, in fact, not perceived as making the city any less democratic.²⁶ The reason for this can be discerned in the fable, too. For although commentators often focus exclusively on the legislative side of the story, it is clear that the Stranger does not think the *dēmos*' involvement ends there. An important element of the democratic rule of law described in the fable is the judicial role of the *dēmos* in bringing the traditional laws and customs to bear on the conduct of the office-holders.

Whenever the year ends for each of the office-holders, there shall be set up courts [δικαστήρια], either of rich men on basis of preselection or again those chosen by lot from the whole people together [σύμπαντος αὐ τοῦ δήμου], and to bring before these courts those who have held office in order to examine their conduct [εὐθύναι], and for anyone who wishes to charge an office-holder that he failed to steer the ships during the year according to the written rules or according to the ancient customs of their ancestors, and the same procedure will take place in the case of those who treat the sick; and for those who are condemned by the vote, the court will have to assess what they should suffer or what compensation they should make.

Plt. 298e11–299a7; trans. ROWE, modified

The institution of the popular courts (which also dealt with the audit of office-holders) was, of course, central to the Athenian democracy.²⁷ But as Josiah Ober has pointed out, the practice of using jurors consisting entirely of ordinary citizens profoundly influenced the way the *dēmos* perceived its own relation to the established laws of the city. Because the ancestral laws and norms were seen as expressions of a deep-seated and broadly shared historical consensus, and since it was the *dēmos* itself that upheld, applied, and enforced those laws in practice, the result was that “the Laws’ never became truly externalized or abstract” as something that might threaten popular power (Ober 1989, 300).²⁸

26 Cf. Ober 1989, 96–98; Farrar 2007, 176–177; for Hansen's view see also 1999, 150–151.

27 This is one of those passages where the Stranger hints at an oligarchic alternative (see above). But again this option is only briefly aired, as we can see from the subsequent allowance that “anyone who wishes” (τὸν βουλόμενον, 299a3) can bring charges against the former office-holders; this brings the account firmly back into the Athenian context.

28 “Laws had been, in some cases at least, affirmed by several generations of Athenians and thus represented the epitome of the masses’ collective wisdom over time [...]. The laws

Rather, the authority of the laws was seen as a manifestation of the rule of the people. Against this ideological background we can see why, even in the fourth century, Demosthenes could declare to the democratic jurors that “the laws are authoritative through you, and you through the laws” (21.224),²⁹ and why Aeschines could make the (to us somewhat paradoxically sounding) claim that “in a democracy, the ordinary citizen rules like a king *by means of the law* and by means of his vote” (νόμῳ καὶ ψήφῳ βασιλεύει, 3.233).

I thus suggest that the Stranger’s fable is intended to capture a law-abiding democracy, like the restored democracy in Athens, where laws and customs that have derived from the people’s shared past experience and collective deliberation come to hold the highest political authority. In accordance with the assumptions of democratic ideology, these laws are perceived as an expression of, rather than a challenge to, rule by the people. For the people’s central role in all aspects of government, including the upholding and judicial application of those laws in practice, carries with it a “very strong identification of the law with the *dēmos* and its institutions and interests” (Cohen 1995, 184). Thus, with his fable, the Stranger attempts to illustrate how, in a law-abiding democracy, the *dēmos* rules through and by laws that reflect what it takes to be the political ‘expert knowledge’ embedded in the community’s traditional values and norms.

Statesmanship and the Ancestral Laws

My suggestion is that this conclusion helps us formulate a satisfactory solution to the problem I posed at the beginning: how can the law-abiding regimes belong among those that “make themselves out to be statesmen and persuade many that they are” (292d6–7). For the story of the democratic city serves to show how such a regime sophistically ‘imitates’ the statesman by pretending to be wise itself. It thus rightly belongs among the ‘chorus’ of rivals that crowd around the statesman and pretend to be one. But the conclusion, importantly, also helps us make progress with the other and more widely debated problem that I mentioned, only to set aside. Given that none of the non-ideal kinds

need not be seen as external to, or as a check upon, the judgment of the *dēmos*, but rather as a partial expression of some of its most cherished and time-tested ideals” (Ober 1989, 165). On the general blurring (from a modern perspective) of separation of powers in Greek politics: e.g. Cartledge 2007, 157.

29 Cf. also his client’s suggestion to the jury that they “help those who believe the voice of the laws is your [the people’s] voice” (42.15; both passages are cited by Ober).

of regime possesses true expertise, what leads the Stranger to think that a law-abiding regime would nonetheless manage to create a *better* imitation? That the democratic regime in the fable thinks itself based on expertise is in itself hardly any guarantee that it in fact manages to take any steps in that direction.

The problem is connected with what appears to be a strange ambiguity at the heart of the Stranger's argument. He wants, it seems, to say two very different things about what it is to be a second best political regime. On the one hand, as we have already seen, in a number of central passages the second best regime is defined by means of a highly conservative political principle: that of being governed in accordance with the established laws and ancestral customs (297e1–4; 300c1–3; 300e11–301a4). But the Stranger also at times presents this principle as equivalent to what seems to be a much more specific claim about the second best. Thus, his initial formulation of the principle of lawfulness in 297e is explicitly presented as the elaboration of the preceding suggestion that “if the regime we’ve been talking about [i.e. rule by a statesman] is in our view the only correct one, do you recognize that the others should save themselves *by using the writings of this regime?*” (τοῖς ταύτης συγγράμμασι χρωμένας, 297d5–7). The same pattern reoccurs later in the discussion. Having described the second best regime as simply one of strict adherence to the established laws, the Stranger goes on immediately to refer to these laws as “imitations of the truth of each thing, *the laws that come from those who know*, written down as far as possible” (τὰ παρὰ τῶν εἰδόντων εἰς δύναμιν εἶναι γεγραμμένα, 300c5–7). Here, “those who know” must, given the context, refer to experts in statesmanship (cf. c9–10: “he who knows, the true statesman”).³⁰ In other words, in both of these passages the Stranger seems to treat as equivalent the claims that (1) being a second best regime requires adherence to the established laws and ancestral customs, and (2) being a second best regime requires adherence to a particular set of laws, namely those that are laid down by a true expert statesman.³¹

30 Rowe has proposed that we read the ταῦτα in 300c5 as referring forward to c8–d2, rather than picking up on the ταῦτα in c2. On this construal, which is adopted in Rowe's translation, c5–7 makes a break with what has gone before: the Stranger is at this point no longer talking about the laws of the second best city at all but exclusively about “the laws that come from those who know”, i.e. the laws laid down by a statesman (1995a, 230–231; followed by El Murr 2014, 254). However, as most previous translations bear witness to (and Rowe himself acknowledges in 2001, 52 n39), grammatically this is not the most intuitive way of construing the passage, and we should only adopt it if we cannot otherwise find a way to make sense of what the Stranger *prima facie* seems to be saying.

31 Something similar also seems to be implied in a later passage where the Stranger says

If many commentators have chosen to focus primarily on the first of these claims, while ignoring or attempting to explain away the second, it is because the latter is seen to regenerate insurmountable problems for the Stranger's position.³² After all, the law-abiding regime is described as one that actively *rejects* individual experts and whose laws derive, instead, from tradition and collective experience. "We seem", Christopher Rowe concludes, "to be left with an absolute contrast between the laws of the ideal city, as based on knowledge, and those of any other city, which in the absence of experts can only be based on 'much experience', the advice of 'some advisers or other' [...], and the approval of the majority, who are certainly assumed to be ignorant" (Rowe 2000, 248). So how can the second-best city ever be said to "use the writings" of the ideal regime?

The text of the *Statesman*, in fact, provides a ready solution to this problem. When that solution has nonetheless rarely been recognized, it has, I believe, less to do with the clarity of the dialogue itself than with the assumptions with which readers have traditionally approached it. Let us return briefly to the discussion of the relation between true expertise and law. In response to young Socrates' qualms about the conclusion that a true statesman should never be bound by laws, the Stranger is made to stress that this does not mean that legislation plays no role in an ideal political regime (293e–294a). Unlike the expert, to be sure, general laws can never identify the 'accurate' and 'appropriate' in each particular case (294a10–c8). But since the expert cannot be everywhere at once, and since he will sometimes be away from the city for a period of time, even he will need to lay down laws for his city to follow in his absence (294c10–e7; 295a10–c5).³³ Having compared the situation to that of athletics trainers, the Stranger says:

that, in non-ideal cities, "it is necessary, it seems, to come together and write things down, chasing after the traces of the most true political system" (301e2–4).

- 32 Skemp 1952, Lane 1998 and Balot 2006 (210–213) pass over the problematic passages. By contrast, Rowe's work on the *Statesman* has done much to bring attention to the problem. For his attempts (not wholly successful, in my view) to solve it: Rowe 1995a (227, 230–231; cf. 2000, 247–248) and, in a different way, Rowe 2013.
- 33 The reference, here, to a lawgiver that leaves the city after having given it a law code has often been seen as an allusion to archaic lawgivers, especially Solon and Lycurgus (e.g. in Hansen 2011 and 2013). However, the allusion is not as obvious as it is often made out to be. After all, the historical lawgivers *wanted* to leave the city and saw a stable law code as politically superior to their own personal rule. (Solon had the option of becoming tyrant, but apparently declined; Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 6.4). By contrast, the Platonic statesman is explicitly said to be forced into legislation by necessity (*ἀναγκάσιον*, 294c10), knowing that it is inferior to his own rule.

Then let's suppose the same about the lawgiver too, the person who will direct his herd in matters of justice and our relation with each other—that he will never be capable, in his prescriptions for everyone together, of assigning accurately to each individual what is appropriate for him. [...] Instead he will, I think, set down the law for each and everyone according to the principle of 'for the most people, for the most cases, and roughly like this', whether rendering it in writing or in unwritten form, and legislating by means of ancestral customs [πατρίοις δὲ ἔθεσι νομοθετῶν].

Plt. 294e9–295a8; trans. ROWE, modified

This passage helpfully makes clear not only what the statesman aims at with his legislation, but also the means by which he reaches that aim. If he cannot be there to accurately direct things himself, he prescribes laws that will generally and in most cases give the right result. How does he formulate such laws? The Stranger simply says that he “legislates by means of ancestral customs” (πατρίοις δὲ ἔθεσι νομοθετῶν). This last addition might perhaps be thought to suggest that the statesman *presents* or *advertises* his own laws as reflecting the city's ancestral customs (even though they are of his own making). The model for this line of thought would be the well-known phenomenon of rulers trying to consolidate or justify a particular arrangement or system by deceptively presenting it as sanctioned by ancient traditions and customs. But there is no hint whatsoever in the *Statesman* to suggest that the Stranger has anything like this in mind. On the contrary, he will later suggest that a statesman's educational efforts would in fact succeed in bringing about in his citizens “true belief [ἀληθὴ δόξαν] concerning what is fine, just, and good” (309c5–7). In the ideal city of the *Statesman* there is, it seems, no need for political deception and revisionist history.

The suggestion in 295a, then, seems rather to be that the ancestral customs serve as the *materials* the statesman uses in his legislative activity (taking the instrumental dative as the dative of material³⁴). He is not someone who makes up good laws from scratch and presents them as sanctioned by tradition and customs. Rather, he ensures that the city is governed in accordance with laws that are, at least, mostly right *by basing his law code on the city's traditional norms and customs*.³⁵ This reading is confirmed in a number of places in the subsequent argument. Imagining the return of an expert from his tempo-

34 Cf. Smyth 1920, 347 (§1508c).

35 Thus understood, the Stranger's claim about the statesman's use of ancestral laws, here, need not turn the latter into “a notional figure”, as suggested by Rowe (1995a, 224).

rary absence, the Stranger asks if he, upon finding the people under his care in unusual circumstances, “would obstinately think that he should not step outside those ancient norms that had at some point been laid down as laws” (ἐκβαίνειν τὰρχαῖά ποτε νομοθετηθέντα, 295d2–3). What the expert encounters upon his return, in other words, is not simply his own laws; it is the ancient norms of the city, laid down (by him) in the form of a law code.³⁶ Immediately afterwards, the same assumption about the statesman’s legislation is likewise needed to make sense of the argument. Having concluded that a statesman must be allowed to dispense with his own laws (or those of a fellow statesman) if his expertise requires it (295e4–296a3), the Stranger mentions the hostility with which the many react to the notion of anyone being able to thus dispense with the laws at his own discretion (296a5–11). Against this popular sentiment, the Stranger argues that it would be ridiculous for people to censure an expert for exercising his expertise, even in cases where they are forced to do something “against what has been written down and ancestral customs” (παρὰ τὰ γεγραμμένα καὶ πάτρια, 296c9–10). Since this argument is clearly introduced to address a worry about the statesman’s dispensing *with his own laws* (295e4–6 with 296a5–6), the Stranger must here be assuming that the statesman’s own laws would be identical with “what has been written down and the ancestral customs [of the city]”. The argument, in other words, requires the assumption that the statesman will base his lawgiving on the city’s traditions and customs. This, I suggest, is the assumption that is made explicit in 295a when the Stranger explains that the statesman “legislates by means of ancestral customs”.

This is where our discussion of the Stranger’s democratic fable and its historical model becomes helpful. For it has served to accentuate the central role of those same traditional laws and norms, used by the statesman, in the case of the law-abiding regimes. When the expert statesman lays down his laws “by means of ancestral customs”, his legislating activity is no different from that of the restored democracy in Athens: he codifies and puts into force the city’s ancestral laws. The second best regimes can therefore rightly be said to “use the writings” of the ideal regime when they adopt a conservative adherence to the laws: in both cases the law code is based on the city’s traditional norms and customs.

36 Puzzled by this passage, Rowe writes: “here roles are suddenly reversed, and instead of laws being compared to a doctor’s written prescriptions, a doctor is envisaged as having the same attitude to his prescriptions as if they were laws of ancient origin” (1995a, 224). Once we accept that the statesman *uses* ancient norms in his legislation there is nothing puzzling about the passage and we can make do without Rowe’s unnecessary “as if”.

For some, perhaps, this conclusion comes as something of a surprise. After all, given our acquaintance with dialogues such as *Republic* and *Laws*, one might find it a somewhat unsatisfactory suggestion that a Platonic expert ruler should merely base his lawgiving on tradition and custom, rather than, say, the eternal dictates of reason or “a paradigm laid out in heaven” (*Resp.* 592b1). But the distinctive theory of political expertise presented in the *Statesman* is in fact fully compatible with a legislative reliance on traditional norms. As the Stranger makes clear, the main distinction he is interested in is the sharp *contrast* between expertise and law: what ultimately defines expertise is that very ability to hit upon the appropriate which law does *not* possess (294a6–c6). This, we should note, is not a simple *ad hoc* definition, but one that grows out of an underlying theoretical framework presented in an earlier, central passage. There, the Stranger has drawn the fundamental distinction between two kinds of “measuring” or “measurement” (μετρητική, 283d1): (a) relative measure, which measures what is “greater and smaller”, and (b) normative measure of what is “appropriate” or “right” in a given context (283d–e), which, he points out, is the alpha and omega of the exercise of any kind of practical expert activity (284c1–3; d1–8). Without this distinction, he states, the ongoing investigation of statesmanship would be hopeless (284a1–b5), and, in case its importance needed further underlining, the Stranger compares its role in the argument with that of the central metaphysical account of not-being in the *Sophist* (284b6–c1).³⁷ On this elaborate theoretical background, the capacity for ‘normative measurement’ on the part of the expert statesman clearly becomes his all-important and defining feature. What truly makes him an expert is not some insight into the eternal blue-print of what the legislative framework of an ideal city should look like. It is the craftsman’s ability, given the ever-changing circumstances of human affairs, to successfully and accurately identify the appropriate standard in each particular case. Hence, the fact that the statesman relies on ancestral norms for his lawgiving, while evidence of a conservative confidence in the value of tradition, does not detract anything from his status as an expert. Lawgiving, after all, is not where political expertise ultimately resides.

However, my suggestion that the expert statesman relies on ancestral laws also raises the more fundamental question of Plato’s general attitude to the value of ‘experience’ in the *Statesman*. If the statesman’s legislation gets it right

37 For this terminology and a helpful discussion of the passage see Lane 1998, 125–136. In her book, Lane traces how the principle of normative measure within a context of concrete and changing circumstances functions as a recurring theme throughout the *Statesman* and links the political theory of the dialogue both with its myth and its methodology.

most of the time, as it is said to do in 295a, then on my reading the Stranger must believe that laws derived from a society's collective experience are of a considerable quality. And to be sure, throughout the discussion the Stranger does repeatedly speak of the laws of second best cities as being valuable and good (εὐνόμους, 293e4; γράμμασιν ἀγαθοῖς, 302e10–11).³⁸ Nonetheless, Christopher Rowe has argued that the Stranger's actual account of those laws as "the product of much experience [ἐκ πείρας πολλῆς], with some advisers having offered attractive advice [χαριέντως συμβουλευσάντων] about each issue and persuaded the majority to enact it" (300b1–4), should not be read as implying any kind of approval. Rather, he argues, the passage in question in fact "pays written laws an extremely back-handed compliment" because (1) 'experience' is usually not highly valued in Plato and (2) the fact that the laws have been established democratically is, "in light of the whole of the preceding context, absolutely no recommendation at all" (1995a, 230).³⁹ This highly deflationary reading of 300b, however, fails to persuade. On Rowe's first point, it should be noted that, unlike in the other Platonic passages mentioned by Rowe, the Stranger is here not simply pointing out that the laws are based on experience; he is stressing how the laws are "the product of *much* [πολλῆς] experience". This qualification is surely meant to highlight something *positive* about them, however limited.⁴⁰ As for Rowe's second point, the account of democratic legislation in 300b clearly seems to indicate an important break with the preceding context, rather than a continuation of it: whereas in the fable the Stranger stressed the amateurism of the decision-making process and the inflexibility of the resulting laws, what he now wants to highlight is that the laws come to be through extended and careful deliberation (rather than, say, through rash and impulsive shot-gun legislation). It is not that he has suddenly

38 By contrast, there is no direct textual basis for El Murr's assumption that these laws "seront généralement mauvaises, même si parfois, par accident, elles pourront être bonnes" (2014, 255).

39 Rowe is here followed by Lane (1998, 156–159); Balot (2007, 212–213); and El Murr (2014, 252).

40 One could also make the additional point that Rowe's list of passages that supposedly exemplify Plato's consistently negative view of *empeiria* seems somewhat selective. For instance, he mentions *Laws* 720b, where the inferior medical skill of a slave-doctor is said to derive merely from experience and practice. But he does not mention *Laws* 12, where the *nomophulakes* are said to refine the judicial regulations of Magnesia by "testing through experience" (ταῖς ἐμπειρίαις διαβασανίζοντας) laws borrowed from other cities, before they "finalize them, ratify them as immutable, and apply them for the rest of their lives" (957b4–5).

forgotten his reservations about democratic legislative practice, but rather that he now wants to turn to consider the positive side of the issue. His description of the deliberative process (“some advisers offering attractive advice”) need not be taken to suggest otherwise. As Friedo Ricken notes in his commentary, the adverb *χαριέντως* (“in an attractive way”) in 300b3 need not have the negative connotations Rowe ascribes to it: it is also the term used in the *Republic* for the part of the citizenry that corresponds to the rational part of the soul (*Resp.* 605b5; Ricken 2008, 200).

There thus seems to be no good reason for denying that Plato, at least in the *Statesman*, is ready to ascribe value to traditional laws based on experience.⁴¹ The contrast with the *Gorgias* is striking. Whereas the notion of *empeiria* in that dialogue implied a rejection of democratic politics as based merely on the unreflective beliefs of common opinion, it is now seen as an important political resource specifically associated with democracy. In particular, the Stranger goes on to explain, the value of the ancestral laws consists in having something like a stabilizing and preserving effect. As he explains with a reintroduction of the ship of state metaphor, regimes that make political expertise a matter of “writings and customs” (*κατὰ γράμματα καὶ ἔθνη*) are surprisingly “strong” (*ἰσχυρόν τι*) and “stable” (*μόνιμοί*), which, if nothing else, serves to keep them from “capsizing” (*ἀνατρέπονται*, 301e6–302a6). They only ‘sink’ when their “steersmen and sailors” arrogantly come to think they themselves possess individual expert knowledge (302a3–b3). What experience-based, ancestral laws can do, in other words, is to keep the ship ‘afloat’ when it is on its own. A law-abiding regime of this kind will be making mistakes, lacking the accuracy that only the expert is capable of, but it will get it right often enough to avoid all-out disaster. An interesting parallel can be found in a piece of Platonic (auto)biography. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato (or someone who knew him well) describes how the moderate and law-abiding democracy that was restored after the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants briefly gave the young philosopher a renewed belief in his home *polis*, but also how this hope was irrevocably dashed when he witnessed how, in the period that followed, “the written laws and customs [*τὰ τε τῶν νόμων γράμματα καὶ ἔθνη*] were eroded at a surprising pace” (*Ep.* 325d5–e3; cf. d3: *τοῖς τῶν πατέρων ἡβησιν καὶ ἐπιτηδεύμασιν*). As in the *Statesman*, this regrettable departure from law and tradition is described as a loss of political stability: “As I witnessed these changes and saw how it was all shifting about in all directions, I ended up dizzy” (e2–3). Exclusive reliance on the authority of traditional laws

41 On the question of the Stranger’s ascription of value to the traditional laws I am in agreement with Samaras 2002, 177–178.

and customs may never be the ideal political situation. But, as the Stranger in the *Statesman* and Plato of the *Seventh Letter* both agree, such laws have, at least, some kind of stabilizing and preserving effect the value of which should not be ignored. In particular, if the alternative is the whims of lawless and ignorant rulers.

Once we appreciate that the basis for legislation is the same in the case of the expert statesman and the second best regime, the question of how the latter can “imitate well” the ideal regime allows of a simple solution. The use of laws might not be what ultimately defines the statesman as an expert, but it is an unavoidable part of the practical exercise of statesmanship. This, I take it, is what the Stranger is getting at when he suggests that “[i]n a way, to be sure, lawgiving clearly belongs to the kingly art” (τρόπον τινὰ μέντοι δῆλον ὅτι τῆς βασιλικῆς ἐστὶν ἡ νομοθετική, 294a6–7). Lawgiving always accompanies the exercise of statesmanship, even if it is not what defines it as such. If this is the right way to take the Stranger’s point here, we can see how the second-best regime can be said to imitate ideal rule better than other forms of regime. In a qualified sense at least (“in a way”), the second best regime, relying on the same experience-based laws as the statesman, does in fact succeed in reproducing a feature of rule by a statesman. Adhering to a law code based on tradition and ancestral custom is a way of being like expert rule, without actually being in possession of that which truly makes an expert. The democratic city in the fable, while rejecting the true expert and wrongly thinking its laws wise instead, does nonetheless imitate his ideal regime far better than lawless and ignorant rulers, be they one or more. If this conclusion sounds too soft in the ears of someone who expected Plato to employ heavier antidemocratic ammunition, there is help to be found in a last twist to the Stranger’s argument. A law-abiding rule, after all, need not be democratic; a single ruler or an oligarchy, too, can stick to the established and ancestral laws (302a–b). Indeed, as we saw, the Stranger has already hinted at the oligarchic alternative at various points throughout the fable. Moreover, he now points out, as a result of its distribution of power “in small portions among many” democracy is “weak in all respects and capable of nothing of any importance either for good or bad”, which has the consequence that a law-abiding democracy is ranked as the worst of the law-abiding kinds of rule (302e–303b). The passage is compressed, but the thought seems to be that both a narrow political elite and an absolute ruler would be able to govern a city in accordance with the traditional laws and norms with more success and efficiency.⁴² The better

42 Cf. Socrates’ remarks in the myth of the *Gorgias* that an ordinary man and democratic

imitation, which the use of these laws and norms are assumed to represent, is ultimately better entrusted to a few strong leaders than to the (Athenian) *dēmos*.

character like Thersites, though wicked, cannot be wholly bad because he does not wield much power (*Gorg.* 525e–526a).

Athenian Measurement: Democracy and Expert Authority in the *Protagoras*

That Plato understood and recognized the importance of Protagoras and his thought is evident from a simple statistical fact: Protagoras is given a major, agenda-setting role in as many as *three* of Plato's dialogues. He sets the stage for subsequent philosophical discussion, not just in the dialogue named after him, but also in the *Theaetetus* and (if to a somewhat lesser extent) in the *Cratylus*. Barring Plato's own mentor, Socrates, this is an honor that no other figure in the Platonic universe enjoys.¹ But the picture is blurred somewhat by what seems to be a lack of connection, or even an incompatibility, between the portrayals of Protagoras that we get in the *Protagoras*, on the one hand, and in the *Theaetetus* and the *Cratylus* on the other. In the *Theaetetus*, in particular, a large part of the discussion is taken up by Socrates' investigation and criticism of the sophist's famous 'measure doctrine' according to which "man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not" (*Theaet.* 152a2–4; cf. *Crat.* 385e4–386a2). Both here and in the *Cratylus*, Socrates interprets this doctrine as stating that whatever appears or seems to each person, either in the form of sense perception or belief, is so for that person, and so as involving a denial of objective, non-relativistic truth.² In both dialogues, too, Socrates clearly implies that Protagoras' association with the measure doctrine is well known: Theaetetus confirms that he has read the sophist's book several times (*Theaet.* 151e–152a), and Hermogenes admits to having thought about it often and to being drawn to it against his better judgment (*Crat.* 386a).

1 The only serious competition for Protagoras in this regard would presumably be Parmenides, who besides dominating the dialogue bearing his name also plays an important role in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. I thank the anonymous Brill reviewer for pointing this out.

2 I mean by "objective, non-relativistic truth" a conception of truth on which what makes a belief true is that it successfully grasps something about a world that is 'out there', independently of the perceptions or beliefs we may have about it. What Protagoras denies is that beliefs can be true in this 'objective' way. In taking the measure doctrine, in the *Theaetetus*, as a statement of *relativism* I follow Burnyeat 1976a and 1990. For a brief discussion of an influential, alternative reading see next chapter (note 2).

Coming from these dialogues, then, we would naturally expect Protagoras' measure doctrine to somehow inform Plato's portrayal of him in the *Protagoras*. This expectation is only heightened by what seems to be Socrates' clear allusion to the measure doctrine near the end of that dialogue, when he insists, seemingly against Protagoras' doctrine, on the need for an "art of measurement" to be concerned with objective truth (*Prot.* 356c8–e4).³ However, a survey of much recent literature on the dialogue would suggest to the reader that the *Protagoras*, surprisingly, fails to deliver on this expectation. Prominent commentaries and introductions to the dialogue are, on the whole, simply silent on the question of whether the measure doctrine plays any significant role in Plato's portrayal of Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, preferring not to attempt an integration of that portrayal into the other Platonic discussions of the sophist.⁴ Catherine Rowett traces the cause of this reluctance to the appearance of an article by S. Moser and G.L. Kustas (1966) which argued that the Protagoras of the *Protagoras* says things that are incompatible with a commitment to the measure doctrine, and which thus dissuaded scholars from seeking a more unified reading of Plato's discussions of the sophist.⁵ As a result, "[t]he current orthodoxy seems to be that Plato ignores relativism in the *Protagoras*" (Rowett 2013, 192).⁶

In this chapter I will follow Rowett in arguing against the current orthodoxy. But whereas her argument is primarily an attempt to show (convincingly, in my view) that Protagoras' position is indeed compatible with the measure doctrine, my claim in this chapter is that we can go further than that. Plato does not ignore or downplay the measure doctrine in the *Protagoras*. Rather, as in the *Theaetetus* and the *Cratylus*, Protagoras' doctrine is what gets the dis-

3 Taylor (1976, 214) and Manuwald (1999, 446) suggest a further allusion to the measure doctrine in Socrates' summary of the outcome of the discussion: "all things are knowledge [πάντα χρήματά ἐστιν ἐπιστήμη]" (361b1–2; cf. the measure doctrine's πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἀνθρώπου εἶναι, *Theaet.* 152a2–3).

4 E.g. Guthrie 1975; Frede 1992; Manuwald 1999; Denyer 2008. For further references see Rowett 2013.

5 Arguments by Moser and Kustas reappear in Taylor 1976, 100–101; Lee 2005, 17. One may want to trace the trend further back to Levi 1940.

6 This orthodox view is nicely encapsulated in the introduction to the new Danish translation of the dialogue, which opens by simply asserting, without further ado, that, despite being Protagoras' most famous *dictum*, the measure doctrine "does not play any role in the *Protagoras*" (Schwartz and Bloch 2011, 295; my trans.). An exception to Rowett's conclusion is Zilioli 2007 (esp. chapter 3). Zilioli's reading of the *Protagoras* has some similarities with my own, but it focuses exclusively on the myth and does not appreciate how the question of relativism connects with later parts of the dialogue.

cussion going in the first place, and it constitutes the main target of Socrates' critical engagement with the sophist. Thus it is fully in keeping with the preceding discussion when Socrates formulates his own position in terms of a rival conception of 'measurement'. That this has rarely been recognized is because, in the *Protagoras*, Plato has Socrates introduce the measure doctrine in its distinctively *political* application, rather than as the epistemological principle we find in the other two dialogues. This somewhat indirect treatment of Protagoras' doctrine in the *Protagoras* is what has made the connection with *Theaetetus* and *Cratylus* less obvious to some scholars, but once we recognize it, Plato's different portrayals of the sophist can be made to illuminate each other in interesting ways. In particular, in the *Protagoras* Protagoras offers an epistemic justification of democracy that rests on his distinctive conception of expert authority as a matter of shared experience of usefulness and improvement, rather than the possession of true beliefs. Much of the present chapter will be taken up by an extended investigation of this argument. Such an investigation is important, however, not only for an understanding of the *Protagoras* itself, but also for our reading of the *Theaetetus* in the next chapter. For Protagoras' 'democratic' conception of expert authority will in turn be taken up in that dialogue where it will turn out to be crucial for making sense of Socrates' famous self-refutation argument.

The Athenian Premise

The literary and dramatic mastery with which Plato prepares and builds up to the encounter between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras* might at first glance seem curiously unmatched by the philosophical strength of Socrates' initial challenge to the famous sophist, which kicks off the ensuing discussion. The challenge (319a–320c) turns on the question of the teachability of what Protagoras professes to teach. If the young Hippocrates chooses to study with him, Protagoras is made to agree, what he will learn is "political expertise" (τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην, 319a4–5), spelled out as the capacity for "good judgment" (318e5) and for being "a real power in political debate and action" (319a1–2). Although the notion of *technē* is introduced by Socrates, not Protagoras, it is one the sophist could well have used himself. After all, as it is often rightly pointed out, the conception of human virtue as a matter of 'expertise' or 'craft' (*technē*) was integral to the sophistic movement of which Protagoras was a leading member. "Like other sophists", Malcolm Schofield writes, "his credentials as one of the new educators of Greece depended on its being accepted that virtue is a field of *technē* or expertise like any other (from mathematics and medicine to naviga-

tion), and on agreement that it is not just a gift of nature or something acquired by practice, but knowledge you can learn from a teacher" (2006, 126). In the *Protagoras* Socrates challenges this central assumption. For this, he partly relies on what seems to have been something of a cliché in contemporary debates on sophistic education. In those subjects where teachers are available, the wisest and best of the citizens, like Pericles, make sure to have their sons educated thoroughly and well, but when it comes to their own "wisdom" they "neither teach them themselves nor hand them over to others" (319d7–320b3). So, judging from their example, political expertise does not seem like something that can be taught.⁷ However, for his first and main argument against Protagoras, Plato has Socrates invoke the deliberative practice of the Athenians, who, he remarks, "I along with the rest of the Greeks call wise" (319b3–5).⁸ When the popular assembly in Athens deliberates on questions of a technical nature, like construction work or ship-building, it relies exclusively on recognized expert craftsmen for advice and howls down any non-expert who dares step forward and think he has something valuable to offer (b5–c7). By contrast, in the case of questions "concerning the management of the city's affairs" the Athenians allow anyone whatsoever to give advice in the assembly and "nobody objects, as in the other case, that [the speaker] hasn't learned it somewhere or had a teacher" (c7–d6). From this we must infer, Socrates suggests, that the 'wise' Athenians do not consider this a teachable expertise (d6–7).

On the face of it, this is not a particularly compelling argument. Why, after all, should Protagoras accept the premise on which it depends: that the Athenians are wise and that the implications of their deliberative practice must be taken seriously? Common reconstructions of the argument merely serve to bring out this apparent weakness. For G.B. Kerferd, for instance, Protagoras is only "in a difficult position" because his rejection of the premises of Socrates' arguments would risk alienating him from the Athenians and losing the protection offered him by the city (1981a, 133).⁹ Others have suggested that the argument is simply based on a premise ('the Athenians are wise') whose plausibility supposedly

7 A version of this argument is also found in the *Dissoi Logoi* (section 6), and it shows up in the *Meno*, where, in addition to Pericles, Socrates invokes Themistocles, Aristides, and Thucydides (son of Melesias) as examples (*Men.* 93a–94e).

8 Manuwald rightly observes that, whereas 'the argument from bad sons' shows up elsewhere (*Meno*, *Dissoi Logoi*), this 'argument from Athenian practice' is found only in the *Protagoras* (2013, 167). As I shall argue, there is a good reason for this.

9 Kerferd is here, it seems, echoing Morrison (1941, 7). I do not think the reading I will propose is incompatible with Kerferd's attractive, if speculative, suggestion that Protagoras' "other precautions" (317b6–7) refer to the support and protection offered to him by Pericles.

derives from its alleged universal acceptance.¹⁰ The worry we might have about these common explanations is that they make Socrates' challenge rely on a premise that he seems to introduce in a somewhat *ad hoc* fashion and which does not really seem to touch upon Protagoras' intellectual position. Whether we take Socrates' challenge to be conditional on Protagoras' personal concerns or on an argument from universal acceptance, the implication is that the sophist's position is refuted (or, rather, supposedly refuted) more by means of what we might dismissively refer to as 'rhetorical' arguments than because it is shown to be problematic in its own right. Someone in Protagoras' line of business, but without his particular concerns for personal safety or an unreflective accept of ethnic clichés, could maintain his claim to teach political expertise, against Socrates' objection, by simply denying the wisdom of the Athenians and their politics on which that objection depends.¹¹ If we want to make sense of Socrates' argument as a philosophical challenge we must ask: why does Socrates think Protagoras should be committed to the Athenian premise?

The first thing to do is to take a closer look at the way Socrates frames his challenge. In particular, we should note how it is conspicuously indirect. After all, the belief in the non-teachability of political expertise is one that Socrates is elsewhere perfectly willing to ascribe directly to the democratic belief system. For instance, in the *Republic's* famous 'ship of state' analogy, the denial of teachability in this area is explicitly presented as an integrated element of democratic discourse used by popular politicians in their attempt to win the approval of the *dēmos*: "they say that it cannot be taught and are ready to tear to pieces anyone who says that it can" (*Resp.* 488b6–7). And, to be sure, it is not hard to see how the notion of political virtue as something that can be bought and learned by those with means to pay for it and the leisure to study it, that is, as something that is available only to the highest and wealthiest strata of the

10 E.g. Taylor 1926, 242; Manuwald 1999, 159. This also seems to be the view of Denyer, whose commentary lists a number of examples of the belief in Athenian wisdom as held by non-Athenians (2008, 97).

11 One way in which this could play out is suggested by Taylor (1976, 73–74). Schofield rightly points out how Socrates himself challenges the assumption of Athenian 'wisdom' in many other dialogues (not least in the *Gorgias*), but he does not say why Protagoras could not simply do the same (2006, 127–128). It is presumably due to this problem that some readers of the dialogue have been tempted to interpret Protagoras' Great Speech as no more than a detached rhetorical performance by a sophist who simply wants to show off and who is wholly uncommitted to the view he is defending, cf. e.g. Schofield 2006, 135 n67; Saxonhouse 2006, 188–189.

population, could in fact be felt to undermine the authority of popular rule and the egalitarian principles on which it was built.¹² A denial of its teachability, on the other hand, would serve to reinforce the authority of the popular regime by encouraging and legitimizing the participation of everyone in political deliberation and decision-making (that is, the *kratos* of the *dēmos*).¹³ However, in the *Protagoras*, rather than directly attributing it to the Athenians, Socrates takes pains to portray the Athenians' belief in the non-teachability of political expertise as one that must be *inferred* from observing the way they go about their collective decision-making. It is because they allow every citizen, regardless of background, to address the assembly on political questions that we must conclude that they do not believe political expertise can be taught (319d6–7). The challenge to Protagoras' claim to political expertise, in other words, is presented as one that arises from what Socrates claims to be the necessary implications of a principle that does not itself make reference to political expertise: the principle of allowing every citizen to address the assembly on political issues. Does this principle, Socrates suggests, not imply a denial of something like expert authority in politics?

Under this description, I suggest, the challenge facing Protagoras begins to look much more familiar. The sophist claims to possess expert authority, but is confronted by Socrates with a principle that seems to imply a denial of the possibility of such authority. The form of this challenge, of course, is the very same as that which Plato has Socrates put to the sophist in the *Theaetetus* and the *Cratylus*. But note that in these two dialogues it is not at all difficult to see how Socrates can take Protagoras to be committed to the premise on which the challenge turns. After all, Socrates takes that premise to be supplied by the

12 For the suspicious attitude of democracy towards political virtue as a teachable skill see Morrison 1941, 7; Frede 1992, xii–xiii. This is not to suggest that the 'teachability' claim was any more congenial to traditional conservatives, like Theognis and the employers of Pindar, who would rightly discern in it the specter of social mobility and accordingly insist that virtue is strictly hereditary (cf. Guthrie 1969, 250–251). Thus it may be that from our bird's-eye perspective on world history the sophistic teachability claim can be construed as the first step in "an anti-aristocratic democratic revolution", where, as G.A. Cohen puts it, "[t]he first innings are for the radical rich, whether they be disaffected sons of the aristocracy or of more *parvenu* origin. The sans-culottes come later" (2013, 13). However, a democracy like that of ancient Athens, where equal access to this kind of teaching must have been an utterly inconceivable notion, is surely excused for not immediately appreciating the democratic potential of the phenomenon. What the sophists offered was, in Werner Jaeger's words, "nicht Volksbildung, sondern Führerbildung" (1973 [1933], 368); cf. Kerferd 1981a, 17; Ostwald 1986, 242; Raaflaub 1983, 530; Schiappa 2003, 171.

13 For this ideological function of democratic *isēgoria* see Raaflaub 1983, 521.

sophist's own famous 'measure doctrine' according to which "man is the measure of all things" (*Theaet.* 152a2–4; cf. *Crat.* 385e4–386a2). In both dialogues Socrates interprets this doctrine as stating that whatever 'appears' to each person, either in the form of sense perception or belief, is so for that person, and he argues that this makes any wisdom and expert authority—including Protagoras' own—impossible. "You strongly believe", Socrates concludes in the *Cratylus* on Hermogenes' behalf, "that if wisdom exists, and foolishness likewise, then Protagoras cannot be telling the truth. After all, if what each person believes to be true is true for him, no one can truly be wiser than anyone else" (*Crat.* 386c6–9, trans. Reeve). If the belief of one person about how things are is no less true than that of the next, then how can Protagoras, or anyone else, put himself forward as wise or knowledgeable about anything?

While the measure doctrine, as it is discussed in the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus*, is first and foremost treated as an epistemological doctrine, it is not hard to see how Socrates could find in the epistemic egalitarianism of that doctrine (every belief is true) a reflection of the political egalitarianism of democratic *isēgoria* (every citizen is allowed to address the assembly).¹⁴ On both principles, each man judges for himself, and the properties that would normally be associated with specialists and experts—true belief and the privilege of serving as an adviser, respectively—are distributed equally to all. In the *Theaetetus*, moreover, Plato has Socrates remark directly on the political overtones of Protagoras' measure doctrine. When Protagoras denies that anyone has "the authority to examine the belief of others in terms of truth and falsehood", and when he makes "each the measure of his own wisdom", so Socrates asks, "how can we avoid the conclusion that he is saying this with an eye to the *dēmos* [δημούμενον λέγειν]?" (161d2–e4).¹⁵ Plato would not be the last to associate democratic sentiments in this way with a certain uneasiness about the role of (objective) truth in politics. "Seen from the view point of politics", Hannah Arendt noted, "truth has a despotic character". This is because its "mode

14 For democratic *isēgoria* as a principle of equality see Wood 1996: in his challenge to Protagoras "Socrates lays out what amounts to the Athenian conception of *isēgoria*, not simply freedom but *equality* of speech" (122).

15 McDowell is uncertain as to whether the δημούμενον accusation refers to the measure doctrine itself or rather to Protagoras' claim to be wise (1973, 158). However, it is not clear how the latter *could* be attractive to the *dēmos* (as distinct from young elite men like Hippocrates), and Socrates' (ironic) remark, a few lines earlier, that he is "very pleased" with the sophist's claim that "what seems to each is so for him" (161c2–3) strongly suggests that it is the measure doctrine, not Protagoras' claim to wisdom, he expects the *dēmos*, too, to applaud.

of asserting validity” is so as to be “something that arises from without, has its source outside the political realm, and is as independent of the wishes and desires of the citizens as is the will of the worst tyrant” (2005 [1967], 302; 303).¹⁶ Once we appreciate how authority based on truth can be felt to rest on this kind of ‘despotic’ self-sufficiency, it is not surprising to find Socrates presenting Protagoras’ epistemological position as congenial to a democratic mindset like that of Athens, committed to the values of political egalitarianism and non-domination.

To be sure, Protagoras is not explicitly associated with the measure doctrine in the *Protagoras*. But Plato must have known that his use of this character in the dialogue would lead the reader/listener to think of the famous doctrine. Moreover, a number of passages in the later discussion are clearly intended to hint at this connection. As Catherine Rowett has pointed out, Protagoras’ little speech on the relativity of benefit and harm (334a3–c6), while it does not strictly and philosophically speaking entail a denial of objective standards, at least shows Plato’s recognition that “the historical Protagoras was prone to talk like this, and that this is what made him famous as a relativist” (2013, 197). Jaap Mansfeld likewise finds the language of the measure doctrine alluded to in Protagoras’ response to Socrates’ complaint that the sophist is making his answers longer than necessary (1981, 44): “Am I, then, to answer at the length that seems necessary for me [ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ], or which seems so to you [σοί]?” (334e2–3). Subsequent dramatic developments do not allow Protagoras to follow up on this hint and introduce his famous doctrine, but it is made clear to the attentive reader that it lurks just beneath the surface of Plato’s portrayal of the sophist. When Socrates invokes the principle of Athenian deliberative practice, with its insistence on treating every judgment equally, the eyes of all those gathered in the house of Callias would thus naturally have turned to the sophist. To confront Protagoras with the practice of democratic *isēgoria*, they would understand, is to confront him with his own measure doctrine in its distinctively political application. There is therefore nothing *ad hoc* or gratuitous about Socrates’ opening argument in the *Protagoras*. The “wise” Athenians (σοφούς, 319b4) with their egalitarian politics simply serve as proxy for the “wise” Protagoras (σοφώτατος, 309d2) with his celebrated measure doctrine. The sophist is challenged to reconcile his claim to expert

16 Arendt goes on to conclude that, while what she calls ‘rational’ or ‘philosophical’ truth has no place in politics, the political realm should respect its own borders and the integrity of ‘factual’ truths. Cf. Estlund 2008, 21–22. A similar sense of the potential ‘despotism’ of truth in politics is characteristic of much postmodern thinking, but is also found in thinkers such as John Dewey (2006 [1919], 375–376). Cf. Williams 2002, 3–4.

authority in politics with a version of the principle *that he himself is famous for*, but which seems to rule out the very possibility of such expert authority.¹⁷

I return in the next chapter to the *Theaetetus* and Plato's explicit discussion of Protagoras' measure doctrine. In this chapter, however, I propose to investigate, first, how the philosophical showdown between Socrates and the famous sophist plays out in the rest of the *Protagoras*. As we shall see, the issue turns on an underlying opposition between two radically different visions of democracy and democratic political life. Is a democratic public characterized by diversity or convergence, by arbitrariness or reason? A large part of the remainder of the chapter will be taken up by a close reading of Protagoras' famous 'Great Speech'. In that speech, I will argue, Protagoras relies on a social pragmatist position on which expert authority derives from people's shared experience of what is useful. He does want to make room for his own ability to improve and refine collective belief, but this claim to improvement must ultimately satisfy the same social standards for expert authority. On this reading, importantly, the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates in the *Protagoras* can be understood as more than simply a clash between two individual philosophers. It is also a generational clash between fundamentally different and historically conditioned world-views, anachronistically brought together by the power of Plato's imagination and literary skill. Whereas Protagoras bases his position on the strikingly optimistic view of human civilization and human capacities that was characteristic of the pre-Peloponnesian war generation of Greek thinkers to which he belonged, Socrates goes on to challenge this position by confronting it with the far bleaker outlook on the human condition that dominated post-war intellectual culture. More specifically, I will suggest that the well-known, but puzzling, discussion of *akrasia* towards the end of the dialogue constitutes Socrates' attempt to undermine the optimistic position Protagoras develops in his Great Speech. Expert authority, Socrates argues against the sophist and his doctrine, cannot be based on what merely 'appears' or 'seems' to people, as Protagoras suggests in his speech. Human belief and appearance is no good guide in life, and what we need is rather an objective standard of 'measurement' based on the truth.

A reading of the *Protagoras* along these lines not only makes good sense of the dialogue itself as a coherent whole. As we shall see in the next chapter, it

17 Other authors have in a similar way gestured at a connection between the Athenian practice and Protagoras' measure doctrine: Taylor 1976, 83–84; Farrar 1988, 78–79; Rademaker 2013, 107.

will also be helpful for understanding the argument of the *Theaetetus*. For the distinctive conception of *technē* and expert authority presented by Protagoras in the *Protagoras* resurfaces, and plays a crucial role, in that dialogue.

Protagoras' 'Great Speech'

Protagoras' strategy for meeting Socrates' challenge in the *Protagoras* is as ingenious as it is bold. What he argues in his so-called 'Great Speech' (320c–328d) is that Socrates' inference from Athenian deliberative practice rests on an unwarranted assumption about the character of democratic political life. Describing how the Athenians deliberate in questions of a political nature, Socrates had said:

When it is a matter of deliberation about the management of political affairs anyone can stand up and advise them: carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, low-born. Nobody rebukes him, as in the previous case [of technical issues], for having no previous training and no teacher, and so he proceeds to attempt to offer advice.

Prot. 319c8–d6

Socrates' description strongly emphasises the multifaceted character of the Athenian 'advisers': in debates on political questions, all sorts of people from all sorts of background—technical, social, and economic—will give advice. It is this focus on the manifold spectacle of democratic deliberative practice that lends credibility to Socrates' suggested inference. After all, if the popular advisers have all these different backgrounds it does not seem like a far step to assume that the advice they offer will itself display the same diversity. This is the intuition that fuels the well-known portrayal of democratic life in *Republic* 8. The result of giving the citizens "an equal share [ἐξ ἴσου] in ruling and in the political system" is to create a city dominated by "all character types" and the greatest variety of political outlooks (*Resp.* 557a2–d8). As Socrates vividly describes it with the analogous case of the 'democratic' man who "puts all his pleasures on an equal footing [εἰς ἴσον, 561b2]":

Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he's idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy. He often

engages in politics, leaping up from his seat and saying and doing whatever comes to his mind. If he happens to admire soldiers, he's carried in that direction, if money-makers, in that one.

Resp. 561c7–d6; trans. GRUBE/REEVE

On this view of the character of democratic *Öffentlichkeit*, the Athenian practice of *isēgoria* becomes nothing more than a political cacophony of all and sundry beliefs and opinions.¹⁸ This is what prompts Socrates' challenge in the *Protagoras*. How, he asks, can a system that puts all such arbitrary judgments on an equal footing simultaneously allow for recognition of some judgments as more authoritative than others? How can Protagoras reconcile his commitment to treating each and every random judgment equally with his commitment to the notion of expert authority in politics as something that can be taught and learned?

Protagoras' strategy in the Great Speech is to reject as unwarranted the central Socratic assumption that the Athenian principle of *isēgoria* is best understood as the equal treatment of a heterogeneous bunch of arbitrary opinions and views that point in all and every direction. Rather, he argues, what makes expert authority, like his own, possible in the first place is precisely the fact that society displays a high degree of agreement and reasoned consensus among its members and their outlook. The diversity and heterogeneity, which Socrates takes to be at the very heart of democracy, is only a surface phenomenon. People may be carpenters or blacksmiths, well-born or low-born, but they have all grown up as members of society and have, thereby, been given a share in a collective political expertise. Beginning from earliest childhood everyone is subject to a continuous process of education in political life, undertaken by the people around him and, later in life, by the city at large (325c5–326e5). Human society is like a political 'craftsman community' where the older members pass on their skill to the young in the same way as language is passed on: everybody teaches it to everybody (327e1–328a8). This provides Protagoras with the means to block Socrates' inference from democratic *isēgoria*. The Athenians' willingness to allow any citizen, regardless of background, to give advice in the assembly on political questions does not imply a denial of teachable expertise in this area, as Socrates assumed. Rather, the Athenians (and everybody else) clearly do recognize such skill as something teachable (323a–324d). But this recognition is fully compatible with their decision-making process because, in the case of politics, *every citizen* possesses the required expertise. So when the

18 Cf. Schofield 2006, 113; Annas 1981, 300–301.

Athenians allow any citizen to give political advice they are in fact not suspending their principle of allowing only expert advice. It is just that, in this specific field, every citizen lives up to the criteria for expertise (322d5–323a4).

Why does Protagoras think political expertise should be this special kind of expertise, taught by everybody to everybody? Protagoras' answer is given in the form of what he calls a *muthos*, a myth or just-so story (320c–324c), which makes up the first half of his speech (followed by a non-mythical argument, a *logos*). When, long ago, mortal creatures were first about to come into being, the gods appointed the Titan brothers, Prometheus and Epimetheus, “to embellish them and distribute to each the appropriate powers” (320d4–6). Epimetheus persuaded his brother to let him make the distribution, only to then screw it up. In the process of meticulously equipping each of the animal species with all the competitive and reproductive techniques that will allow the species to survive, he accidentally uses up all of the available “powers” on the animals, leaving man “naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed” (321c5–6). To secure the survival of human beings Prometheus took charge and gave to them “the wisdom embedded in craftsmanship along with fire” he had stolen from Hephaestus and Athena (c7–d3). Humans were now able to supply for their physical needs (food, clothes, shelter), but since they did not yet possess “the political art” they lived non-communal lives, scattered around, and were therefore unable to protect themselves from the onslaught of wild animals (d3–5; 322b1–4). Zeus feared for the survival of the species and ordered Hermes to bring the humans “shame and justice, so that there would be order within cities and bonds of friendship to unite them” (322c1–3). Unlike other skills and crafts, however, Zeus ordered that in the case of these specific skills everyone should have a share. “For cities would never come to be if only a few possessed these, as is the case with the other arts” (322d2–4).

Alone among the *technai*, then, the political craft of justice and shame must be universal possession if it is to help man out of his original predicament. It is this feature of it that allows Protagoras to reinterpret Athenian deliberative practice. As Schofield puts it, his argument for the compatibility of the Athenians' decision-making process with the acceptance of expert authority in politics takes the form of an attempt to show that “[t]he social virtue necessary for the existence of a political system is the social virtue sufficient for active participation in its decision processes” (2006, 129). Since all must share in these skills “if there are to be cities”, all are rightly allowed to give advice in the assembly on political questions (322e2–323a3).

There is little disagreement in the literature about the status of the ‘divine intervention’ element itself in the Great Speech. After all, the historical Protagoras was famous for his explicit agnosticism about the gods (DK 80 B4),

and Plato shows that he is fully aware of this aspect of the sophist's thought when he has him say, in the *Theaetetus*, that "the existence or non-existence of the gods I exclude from all discussions, written or spoken" (*Theaet.* 162e1–2). So we are surely justified in treating the story of divine intervention in the Great Speech as non-literal, mythological colouring, intended to convey Protagoras' argument in a way that is "more pleasant" for the listener (320c).¹⁹ But to what does the collective political *technē* owe its authority, if not to divine provenance?

The mythological story of Prometheus and Zeus is inserted, somewhat artificially, into a larger *Kulturgeschichte*, describing the rise and development of human civilisation from primitive beginnings. Protagoras' account is a version of the idea, widespread in antiquity, that the invention of crafts, *technai*, was the means by which mankind ascended from a primitive and insecure state of nature to the relative security and comfort of civilised life.²⁰ He also follows tradition in associating this invention with the uniquely human possession of fire understood as a symbol of human intelligence applied to the challenges of life (the acquisition and use of the crafts would be impossible without fire: 321d2–3).²¹ For a number of pre-Socratic philosophers fire had been singled out as the active and rational element in everything (Heraclitus, Parmenides, Democritus), and Aeschylus' Prometheus is made to boast that his gift of fire is "the teacher of all crafts to mortals" (*Pr.* 110–111) and that from fire "they will learn many crafts" (254).²² Significantly, despite also choosing to follow traditional Greek mythology in presenting this human capacity as a later gift from above, Protagoras indicates that it is in fact better understood as an inherent feature of us. For in what seems to be a mild instance of mythical overdetermination, he describes how, before calling upon the Titan brothers to distribute 'powers', the gods had already fashioned the mortal races using "a mixture earth and fire, as well as various blends of fire and earth" (320c8–d3). The sophist does not go into details about what the exact proportions between these two elements were in the respective 'mixtures' that made up the different races, but

19 Cf. Havelock 1957, 407–409; Cole 1967, 51; Taylor 1976, 80; Denyer 2008, 100–101. Kerferd seems to be an exception (1953, 45). Beresford suggests that, besides pleasantness, Protagoras' use of mythology is also motivated by his desire "to conceal, or at least soften, the godlessness of the underlying theory" (2013, 143).

20 E.g. Aesch. *Pr.* (450–506); Moschion (fr. 6 *TrGF*); and the praise of "all-resourceful man", making his way in a hostile world by means of *technē*, in Soph. *Ant.* (332–383). For the association between *technē* and civilization in general: Campbell 2006, 50.

21 Cf. Campbell 2006, 4; Manuwald 1999, 190.

22 For these and further references see Denyer 2008, 104–105.

he hints that mankind got the greater share of fire: even *before* Prometheus is made to save the day with his stolen goods, Protagoras speaks of the human race in explicit contrast with “those races without reason” (τὰ ἄλογα, 321c1), i.e. the animals.²³ The intelligence needed to develop crafts, he implies, was in us from the beginning.²⁴

But how does the ‘fiery’ intelligence specific to mankind lead to the discovery of the crafts? Here, too, Protagoras writes within a distinct tradition. The striking similarities, both in terms of language and content, between Protagoras’ *muthos* and the anthropological account of the origins of culture and society provided by Diodorus of Sicily has often been noted.²⁵ On the account we get in Diodorus, which most likely draws on a fifth century source, human culture and civilisation are the result of a distinctively empirical and pragmatic course of progressive learning.²⁶ It is by a process of trial and error (πείρας, 1.8.7), guided by experience of what is “beneficial” (συμφέροντος, 1.8.2) and “useful” (χρησίμω, 1.8.8), that human beings develop the techniques and skills, both technical and social, that allow them to meet the challenges of life. This was a common trope in fifth century anthropological speculation. Tellingly, the tragedian Moschion simply lumps the pragmatic outlook together with the Prometheus

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- 23 The background idea may be that “fire” is simultaneously both a principle of life and a principle of intelligence. So, although animals have some limited share in it *qua* living beings, only man can (in virtue of his larger share) be said to truly possess reason. Cf. Archelaus’ account of the origin of civilization (according to Hippolytus): “Men were distinguished from the other animals, and established laws, rulers, crafts, cities and so on. Intelligence [νοῦν], he says, is inborn in all animals alike; for each of the animals, as well as man, makes use of intelligence, though some more rapidly than others” (DK 60 A4).
- 24 The fact that the phrase τὰ ἄλογα is missing in manuscript B has sometimes been used as grounds for deleting it so as to make Protagoras’ story less overdetermined. However, as Manuwald argues, such a deletion would not be so easy, because it would require more changes in the text (1999, 188). At any rate, given the mythical status of *both* the Prometheus story *and* the story of the gods mixing earth and fire, Protagoras would hardly have seen the aetiological overlap as a serious problem for his argument.
- 25 Morrison 1941 helpfully lists the many instances of similarity. Cf. Beresford 2013, 140–142. For the question of Diodorus’ source see, in particular, Cole (1967), who, like Diels-Kranz, identifies it as Democritus (= DK B5.1).
- 26 I do not use these terms in the highly technical senses they have acquired in later philosophy. By ‘empirical’ I mean to characterize the process as one guided by *empeiria*, ‘experience’, as a result of *peira*, ‘experimentation’ or ‘trial and error’. By ‘pragmatic’ I mean to characterize the process as first and foremost motivated by *practical* challenges to human life (how to survive; how to live together), rather than, say, intellectual curiosity or a philosophical sense of ‘wonder’.

legend when he says that human beings “changed their savage way of life for civilisation” either “by the forethought of Prometheus, or through necessity, or through long practice making nature herself their teacher” (fr. 6 *TrGF*).²⁷ Moreover, as both Diodorus and Moschion emphasise, on an account of the origin of civilisation along these lines the historical dimension is indispensable. Moschion speaks of the need for “long practice”, and in Diodorus, just as with the discovery of technical crafts, the capacities for life in a community are something that comes to be “little by little” (κατὰ μικρὸν, 1.8.8; cf. 1.8.2; 1.8.3; 1.8.7). Since those capacities arise from a process of learning from experience about what is useful, the function of all *technai*, both technical and social, must be understood against a developmental background. As Xenophanes was supposed to have said, “Not from the beginning have the gods revealed all things to mortals, but in time [χρόνῳ] by seeking they discovered [ἐφευρίσκουσιν] what is better” (DK 21 B18).²⁸

Despite Protagoras’ introduction of mythical imagery (Prometheus and Zeus) into his account, a close reading of his *muthos* suggests that he shares his underlying conception of *technē* with these other writers and thinkers. Having relegated Prometheus (and his brother) back into the realm of myth where they belong (cf. “as it is told”, 322a1–2), Protagoras gives a brief demythologised account of the rise of the technical crafts among human beings.²⁹ “It wasn’t long before they articulated for themselves speech and words as a matter of craftsmanship [τῇ τέχνῃ], and they discovered for themselves [ηὔρετο] houses, clothes, shoes and blankets, and were nourished by food from the earth” (322a5–8). The origin of the crafts that help mankind out of its original predicament is the application of human intelligence itself. It is human beings themselves who develop communicative skills, and who “discover for themselves” (ηὔρετο, 322a9) the various techniques that ensure their survival.³⁰ Of course, a difference from the other anthropological accounts discussed above might seem to lie in Protagoras’ suggestion that all this happened “before long” (or “quickly”, ταχὺ, a6).³¹ But, in fact, this addition seems merely intended to show

27 Cf. Campbell 2006, 50–51.

28 On the character and importance of the temporal dimension in Greek anthropological accounts of the emergence of *technai* and civilisation: Meier 1983, 460–461.

29 Note how this non-mythical account (322a3–b1) has its mythical parallel in 321c1–d5. In both passages we go from (1) the introduction of technical crafts to (2) a state of technological proficiency but no communal life.

30 Manuwald rightly notes that “[d]er Gebrauch des Mediums [...] akzentuiert die eigenen Möglichkeiten des Menschen zum Fortschritt” (1999, 193).

31 Thus Schiefsky 2005, 158; Manuwald 2013, 173; cf. Havelock 1957, 91.

that, while he does take a historical view of the development of all crafts, he wants to contrast the relative simplicity of technical skills with a (in his view) much more important cultural achievement, “the political craft”, whose origin he goes on to explain.

Thus equipped, human beings first lived scattered around; there were no cities. They were being destroyed by wild beasts because they were weaker in every way, and although their technical craftsmanship was sufficient help for them in obtaining food, it was deficient when it came to fighting the wild beasts. For they did not yet possess the political craft, of which the art of war is a part. They would attempt [ἐζήτουν] to gather together and survive by founding cities. But when they did so, they would wrong each other, not having the political craft, and so they would again be scattered and perish.

Prot. 322a8–b8; trans. LOMBARDO/BELL, modified

At this point, Protagoras picks up again on his mythological narrative: Zeus is introduced to supply mankind with the political craft they so badly need, in the form of “justice and shame”, and to explain that, unlike the other crafts, this one must be possessed by all (322c1–d5). That Protagoras chooses Zeus, rather than Prometheus, as the agent of salvation this time around is surely to be explained by conventional mythological assumptions. Zeus was traditionally portrayed as the guarantor of justice among human beings, the father of personified Justice who walks among mortals.³² Importantly, this suggests that we have no ‘mythological’ reasons for assuming that the *mechanism* by which mankind obtains the political craft is any different from that by which they invent the technical crafts. The distinction between Prometheus and Zeus concerns the domain of the craft in question, not its mode of acquisition.³³ In fact, there is reason to take Protagoras to be suggesting that the political craft has come to be in exactly the same way as the technical ones. Not only does he take special pains here to stress that he conceives of human political capacities on the model of *technē* (322b5, b8), like those crafts that have just been described as coming to be from human inventiveness. He also makes clear that the acquisition of this *technē* is preceded by a process of trial and error. The early human beings are described as engaging in *repeated attempts* at forming communities: note the iterative and conative force of the imperfect ἐζήτουν (“they would attempt”,

32 Cf. Denyer 2008, 108.

33 Pace Beresford 2013, 153–155.

322b6).³⁴ What precedes the acquisition of the political craft is a series of experiments with communal life, and it is reasonable to assume that, if we lift the veil of myth, it is exactly this process that eventually leads to the development of the *politikē technē*.³⁵

This reading is supported by Protagoras' terminology in the subsequent *logos* part of his speech. We saw that the experience-based development of crafts in Diodorus aimed at "the useful things" (χρησίμων, 1.8.5; 8.7). In fact, as he says with a word from the same root, "practical need itself [τὴν χρείαν αὐτὴν] was the teacher of man" (1.8.9).³⁶ The same term shows up, conspicuously, in Protagoras' description of the universal education in political expertise that takes place in the city. In learning to use the cithara the young are taught to be "useful [χρήσιμοι] in speaking as well as in action" (326b4), and the sophist goes on to add that, as regards physical training, the education aims at equipping the young with "sound and healthy bodies in the service of a useful mindset" (τῇ διανοίᾳ χρηστῇ, b7). What Protagoras says, importantly, is not simply that the young are taught the tools or techniques that are useful *for* speech and action. What he suggests is that for you to become good at these things is to *become useful* yourself: it is the students *themselves* who are taught to be

34 This observation speaks strongly against the reading of the Great Speech proposed by Denyer in a number of recent works where he suggests that Protagoras' argument represents a version of the social contract theory presented by Glaucon in *Republic* 2 (2013, 163–164; 2008, 107–108). On such a theory, justice is the (historical or hypothetical) result of individuals' rational considerations of personal advantage and disadvantage. But in the present passage Protagoras clearly portrays the acquisition of political *technē* as matter of progressive learning based on repeated attempts, rather than a rational trade-off à la Glaucon. (It is telling that, in his paraphrase of the passage, Denyer misleadingly turns the human experiment in communal living into a one-off attempt: "... they came together [...] they abandoned the attempt"; 2013, 163–164). Beresford 2013 helpfully lists a number of observations that speak against a Glauconian reading of Protagoras' speech, but his general account is marred by his unwarranted assumption that these observations speak against *every* reading that makes political *technē* a cultural achievement (rather than a natural endowment). Something can be a product of human culture without being the product of rational calculation of self-interest. Cf. Kahn 1981.

35 This conclusion is not in itself new, but it has rarely been sufficiently argued for, cf. e.g. Morrison 1941, 10–11; Havelock 1957, 407–409; Taylor 1976, 81; Schiefelsky 2005, 158; and (more cautiously) Cole 1967, 51.

36 The connection between usefulness and practical need is evident: something is judged to be useful *relative* to some practical need or problem. Indeed, although χρεία is probably best translated as "practical need" here, it can at times be rendered simply "use" or "advantage", cf. LSJ. s.v. χρεία (111).

χρήσιμοι. The usefulness is, in other words, relative to a collective good and answers a collective need. This in turn means that Protagoras' choice of words, here, serves to link the *logos* with the anthropological account in the *muthos*. Political expertise arose among human beings by a process of trial and error as the response to the practical challenges of their environment. Thus, when everybody teaches everybody the political 'craft of justice', they are reproducing an expertise that experience has shown to be 'useful' for securing our collective good. They are, as he says with another word that recalls the anthropological background theory, teaching each other "the discoveries" (εὐρήματα) made in the past (326d6; cf. 322a8).³⁷

Scholars sometimes like to point out that, in his speech, Protagoras conspicuously fails to say anything concrete about what he takes the *content* of the universally shared political *technē* to be. In other words, he fails to answer the question: what particular principles and values shape a society that live in accordance with this expertise?³⁸ But to press this question is, I think, to misunderstand the nature and orientation of Protagoras' argument in a way that in turn has had the effect of making that argument seem problematic from the point of view of other Platonic portrayals of the sophist. For the question implies that the "justice and shame" which everybody shares in can be spelled as comprising a set of definite moral principles, and that societies that are guided by them must share certain definite norms. This is what led Moser and Kustas to argue that the argument of the Great Speech commits Protagoras to a position incompatible with his measure doctrine. Rather than making norms and values relative to individual persons or cities, Protagoras seemed to them to appeal to universal moral truths when he argues that justice and shame are "the necessary conditions for *any polis*" (1966, 111; emphasis in original).³⁹ However,

37 I do not think Protagoras' ascription of these discoveries to "good and ancient lawgivers" should be taken to suggest that the discovery of the political craft is, after all, the one-off deed of distinctive and distinctively gifted *individuals* (rather than a gradual, collective achievement, as the *muthos* suggested). After all, as Schiefelsky notes in a different context, in Greek anthropological thought "[t]he notion of discovery is associated with the idea of gradual accumulative progress" (2005, 145). Protagoras is thus merely following convention in attributing the traditional mores and norms of society to 'ancient lawgivers'. Cf. 326a3–4 where he holds up "the good men of old" described in traditional poetry as examples to be followed.

38 E.g. Levi 1940: "Protagoras is quite rightly censured for not duly clarifying and defining the leading conceptions of his ethics, to which he attributes a universal validity" (296). Cf. Taylor 1976, 101.

39 Cf. also Levi 1940, 295; Taylor 1976, 100–101; Nussbaum 1986, 104 with note 39.

as Catherine Rowett has helpfully insisted, we need to take seriously Protagoras' suggestion that acquiring the capacity for "justice and shame" is like coming to practise conventional performance arts, like flute-playing (327a–c).⁴⁰ Thus we should be careful not to see in Protagoras' argument an appeal to a set of universally shared moral principles or norms that must be recognized by all.⁴¹

Zeus [in the *muthos*] does not say that humans are to *learn what justice is* or come to *know* anything. Rather, he requires that *they be given 'justice' and 'shame'*. Protagoras compares it with learning the flute (not some facts about flute music, or about the existence and nature of flutes, but acquiring *the practice of using flutes*). So acquiring 'justice' and 'shame' is not getting to know about mind-independent values, but developing some emotional and evaluative capacities and practices, a gift for seeing the world in value terms, for thinking of things as right or wrong.

ROWETT 2013, 199; emphasis in original

This interpretation of Protagoras' political *technē* makes it fully compatible with the measure doctrine and its denial of objective, non-relativistic standards. A shared perception of usefulness gradually leads all human beings to adopt the general practice of thinking of, and dealing with, their world and each other in moral terms. But this is not to say that the terms they use are the same in all cases. Every community will approve of certain forms of behavior and be repulsed by others, and the authoritative status of such response will in each case derive from the common practical experience of the community. But "[t]here is no need to suppose that what they find repulsive will be universal, or that they are grasping real values, or coming to know anything that is not socially constructed" (Rowett 2013, 199). While it may be necessary for the citizens of cities everywhere to be able to play the flute, they need not be playing the same melody in every city.⁴²

40 Cf. Schofield 2006, 129.

41 Pace Levi 1940, 295 ("the acknowledgement of universal ethical values"); Moser and Kustas 1966, 111 ("universal morals that are necessary for any polis"); Denyer 2008, 109 ("everyone must know about justice").

42 For a similar defense of the argument in the myth as compatible with relativism: Zilioli 2007, 100–101.

Protagoras' Social Pragmatism

Protagoras' Great Speech reconciles Athenian deliberative practice with the recognition of expert authority in politics by arguing, against Socrates, that democratic political life is, at bottom, characterized by collective learning processes and reasoned convergence, not diversity and arbitrariness. Every citizen has been trained as an expert in politics. At first this democratization of political *technē* might seem to pose a problem for Protagoras' own claim to expert authority. After all, why should anyone agree to his high fees and become his student if they are already experts themselves? But Protagoras suggests that, far from threatening to undermine his own position, the collective learning processes of society, which lead to general epistemic competence in politics, are also what account for his own particular claim to expert authority. In the introductory conversation with Hippocrates, Socrates had suggested that the sophist's educational practice is like that of some visiting merchant, who praises all and sundry products he happens to have in his possession, leaving us no way of telling whether they are good or bad for us (313c–314a). Protagoras, when he comes to give his response, attempts to push back and expose Socrates' 'merchant' comparison as false and misleading.⁴³ On the contrary, he argues, we must understand that his *technē* hails from within a distinguished collective tradition whose usefulness has proven itself beyond reasonable doubt. Already at an early stage in the conversation the sophist had launched into a short speech about the dangers of being a sophist. "I claim that the sophistic art is an ancient one, but that the men who practiced it in ancient times, fearing the odium attached to it, created a smokescreen so as to disguise themselves" (316d3–6). As examples of these undercover sophists Protagoras lists a number of famous poets, religious figures, and athletes, from Homer over Orpheus to Iccus. However the significance of this extraordinary claim to professional pedigree does not become fully clear until we get to the Great Speech itself. The "men of ancient times", we are now told, are those who best embody the "the political craft" in which all members of society share. The young are taught "the poems of good poets" (325e5; 326a6–7) as well as "eulogies of good men of ancient times" (326a2–3), and Protagoras seems to assume that their physical

43 I mean this as a philosophical rather than a 'dramatic' point. I do not mean to suggest that Protagoras, in the dialogue, is consciously responding to Socrates' earlier characterization (which he, of course, did not witness). However, the view of the travelling sophists as somewhat suspicious, because of what was seen as their lack of civic attachment and the radical nature of their thought, was presumably widespread and it may be such 'unnamed accusers' (cf. *Apol.* 18a–e) Protagoras is addressing.

training ('gymnastics') follows the same principle (326b6–c3). By locating his own *technē* in the long line of famous proponents of shared political expertise Protagoras is presenting it as fulfilling a distinct function within a moral and social framework whose general authoritative status has been established in practice by the collective experience of communal life.

This strategy comes to the surface most clearly at the end of the Great Speech, when Protagoras turns from the universal education undertaken in the 'craft community' as a whole to his own role as educator.

As it is, Socrates, you are acting just like spoiled child. For everyone here is a teacher of virtue, each to the best of his abilities, and yet you can't see a single one. You might as well look for a teacher of Greek—you wouldn't find a single one of these either. Nor would you be any more successful if you asked who could teach the sons of our craftsmen in the very craft they of course learned from their fathers, to the extent that their fathers could, and from their fellow craftsmen in the trade. It wouldn't be easy to find a teacher to continue their training, whereas it would have been easy to find one for those without any experience whatsoever. It is the same with virtue and everything else. However, if there is someone among us who distinguishes himself, just a little bit, in helping others advance in goodness, he is to be cherished. I consider myself one of those people [...]

Prot. 327e1–328b1; trans. LOMBARDO/BELL, modified

Protagoras had begun by promising Hippocrates that the young man, should he choose to become his student, would become "better every day" (318a9). We can now see how this promise of improvement should be understood against the background of Protagoras' general vision of society as shaped by our shared experience and capacity for collective learning. What Protagoras teaches is a kind of modest augmentation of the expertise that is commonly practised and recognised within the 'craft community' of society. In this way, he manages to simultaneously present his own teaching as both (1) attractive for prospective elite students, promising to help them excel in public life, and (2) compatible with affirming the wisdom of the Athenian political practice of *isēgoria*. After all, since Protagoras' *technē* can be seen as a continuation of popular expertise, rather than something to be contrasted with popular ignorance, it does not really (he suggests) stand in any tension with acknowledging the general expert authority of the democratic community. He is teaching his students the very same thing that every citizen learns by growing up in the city and which collective experience has established as authoritative—only in a slightly more refined and improved version.

As the Hippocratic treatise *On Ancient Medicine* shows, this was a well-known strategy among fifth and fourth century writers for lending to their preferred practices and beliefs the authority of a solidly established *technē*. In response to those who propose to put medicine on a sound scientific basis by means of “newfangled hypotheses” (such as reducing its factors to a small number of basic principles), the Hippocratic author explains how no such thing is needed. Although we may not have noticed it, the authority of medicine and its practitioners is in fact already well established as a *technē* and has been so for a very long time. In an anthropological account that shares its pragmatic outlook with many others of its genre, the author describes how early human beings collectively discovered the usefulness of a separate regimen for animals and human beings.⁴⁴ The cooperative establishment of this shared practice, he claims, can, in some sense at least, be understood as the collective share in the art of medicine:

To this discovery and search what more just or fitting name could one give than medicine, since it was discovered for the sake of the health, preservation, and nourishment of the human being, in place of that regimen which led to suffering, diseases, and death? But it is not unreasonable if it is not considered an art: for in the case of an art in which no one is a lay person but all are knowledgeable because they must make use of it [ἦς γὰρ μηδεὶς ἐστὶν ιδιώτης, ἀλλὰ πάντες ἐπιστήμονες διὰ τὴν χρῆσιν τε καὶ ἀνάγκην], it is not fitting for anyone to be called an expert. And yet the discovery [εὑρημα] was a great one and the result of much examination and artful contrivance [πολλῆς τέχνης τε καὶ σκέψιος].

[Hippocrates] *On Ancient Medicine* 3.6–4.2; trans. SCHIEFSKY 2005, modified

As the author goes on to argue, “the one who is called a doctor and is agreed to be a craftsman” is not in fact doing anything other than exercising this ancient craft of dietetics, possessed by all. As regards “method and discovery”, his expertise is “one and the same” as that of “the person who originally discovered and prepared for all human beings the nourishment we make use of today” and allowed us to abandon “that savage and brutish regimen” (7.1). What distinguishes the recognised doctor’s expertise from that of men at large, the author says, is merely that his has “more aspects, is more complex, and requires more diligent effort” (7.3). For Protagoras in the Great Speech, of course, it is “the

44 For a lucid account of the nature and purpose of the *Kulturgeschichte* in *On Ancient Medicine* see Schiefsky 2005, 152–160.

political craft” (rather than the technical crafts, such as medicine) that is the truly collective achievement, developed as a necessary response to human needs and the challenges of the natural environment. But the basic strategy for endowing his own professional activity with craftsman authority by locating it within the framework of an empirically established and widely shared *technē* is one he shares with the Hippocratic author.⁴⁵

Interestingly, the social pragmatism that informs this argumentative strategy is echoed, at the microscopic level, in a supplemental argument from the experienced usefulness of Protagoras’ own educational activity. The sophist concludes his Great Speech with an explanation of his peculiar principle for the payment of student fees.

I consider myself one of those people, distinguished in my ability to assist others in becoming noble and good, and worth the fee that I charge and even more, so much so that it also seems so for the person who has been taught [ὥστε καὶ αὐτῷ δοκεῖν τῷ μαθόντι]. This is why I charge my fee in this particular way: When someone has been taught by me, he pays what I charge only if he wishes to; if not, he goes into a temple, states under oath how much he thinks the lessons are worth, and then puts down as payment [κατέθηκε] that amount.

Prot. 328b1–c2; trans. LOMBARDO/BELL, modified

In his first characterisation of the sophist, Socrates had suggested that, since Protagoras, like a mere travelling vendor in psychic nourishments, praises all his products indiscriminately, the resulting behaviour of his easily manipulable non-expert customers can never be a reliable guide for determining whether he possesses expert authority or not. After all, how would they, as non-experts, be able to make an informed judgment about who to buy from? But that, Protagoras would protest, is to get the criterion for expert authority fundamentally wrong. It misses the role of learning and experience. Why *do* some practitioners get a good reputation so that the customers return again and again and recom-

45 Note the close similarity in language: μηδεὶς ἐστὶν ἰδιώτης (*On Ancient Medicine*) and οὐδένα δεῖ ἰδιωτεύειν (*Prot.* 327a1–2). Curiously, while the illuminating similarity between the two texts has been noted by Schiefsky in his recent commentary on *On Ancient Medicine* (2005, 159; 172), I am not aware of it ever having been made in the literature on the *Protagoras*. Zilioli (2007, 102) does make comparative reference to *Ancient Medicine* in his discussion of the myth, but (surprisingly) fails to remark on this particular similarity in ideas and language.

mend him to their friends and relatives? Why is one practitioner approached by young men who want to become his disciples and apprentices, resulting in the establishment of a ‘school’, while another has few or no followers?⁴⁶ The customers need not be experts, but their cumulative experience with the practitioner must be that his activities and beliefs are useful and so valuable as to be worth paying for. In the above passage, Protagoras makes this idea the basis for his principle of payment. His life-long claim to expertise in a *technē* (cf. 317c1–3), and thereby his claim to be worth a high fee for his teachings, is justified by the consistent and systematic experience of his students that those teachings are in fact worth that sum. The crucial thing is that this value “also seems so for the person who has been taught” (ὥστε καὶ αὐτῷ δοκεῖν τῷ μαθόντι, 328b4–5), something that can be ascertained when the pupil either agrees with Protagoras’ suggested price or goes to the temple and states, under oath, “how much he thinks the lessons are worth, and then puts down as payment that amount” (c1–2).⁴⁷ Either way, on this principle, Protagoras’ claim to expert authority is directly vindicated by his consistently and systematically high income—he is, famously, making a lot of money (cf. *Men.* 91d; *Hipp. Maj.* 282e)⁴⁸—a direct function of the general perception, among his ex-students, that what he teaches is valuable and useful. (Note that Hippocrates, on the basis of what he has heard, *expects* to pay the full sum; 310e1–2.) If, hypothetically,

46 Even in spite of the social stigma attached to the sophistic profession (cf. 311e–312a), Protagoras was nonetheless among those training young men in the trade (315a3–5).

47 Denyer takes Protagoras to be suggesting that the student in the latter case should pay the money “to the temple, to become the property of the god” (2008, 120; cf. Gagarin 1969, 139). As the verb κατατιθέναι can mean both “deposit” and simply “put down as payment”, both readings are possible. But Aristotle’s paraphrase of the principle seems to support the reading on which the amount is paid to Protagoras, not the temple: “This is what they say Protagoras used to do: whenever he taught anything whatsoever, he bade the one who had learned assess what this knowledge seemed worth to him, and accepted that amount” (*N.E.* 1164a24–26). The function of the whole going-to-the-temple-and-swearing business, in other words, is simply to make sure Protagoras’ fee is in accordance with what the student truly believes his teachings to be worth. This reliance on religious deference is not incompatible with his famous agnosticism: as Werner Jaeger suggested, the *On the Gods* fragment (DK 80 B4) may very well as been the opening lines of a work on religion “as an anthropological fact to be understood in the light of its meaning and function in human civilisation and social structure” (1947, 176; cited in Schiappa 2003, 145). Cf. the origins of religious practice in the *muthos* (322a).

48 For high price charged by (and presumably paid to) the historical Protagoras see Diogenes Laertius 9.52.

it were not generally perceived in this way, Protagoras would have no claim to being an expert worth anything, and thus no expert at all.⁴⁹ Given Plato's suggestion of this close connection between Protagoras' general conception of expert authority and his policy regarding fees it is not surprising that the latter seems to have been of great importance to the historical sophist; that he was famous for it is clear from Plato's references to it both here and, mockingly, in the *Theaetetus* (*Theaet.* 165d–e), and Diogenes Laertius mentions, on his list of surviving works by Protagoras, one named simply *On the Proceedings for Paying Fees* (DL 9.55).

Problems with Appearance

In the modern literature on the *Protagoras*, the main objection to Protagoras' argument in Great Speech has tended to focus on his claim that making young men into "a real power in political debate and action" (319a1–2) can be seen as simply teaching a modest improvement of the basic skills in 'justice' and 'shame' that have made communal life possible. Is the difference between these two things really only a matter of degree, as Protagoras seems to suggest? Is not basic moral and social competence something very different from the *technē* of political leadership? These are legitimate questions, and it is not immediately clear how Protagoras would go about answering them.⁵⁰ But it is important to note that this is not a line of criticism Socrates himself is made to pursue in the dialogue. Rather, what Socrates is at pains to refute, so I will argue, is the optimistic vision of democracy on which both Protagoras' epistemic conception of democracy as well as his own claim to expertise rests.

49 Drawing on a recent essay by Raymond Geuss, we can perhaps think of the disagreement between Socrates and Protagoras on the question of the criterion for expert authority as marked out by the distinction between two Greek phrases that can both be translated as 'to give an account' (of oneself). The phrase *διδόναι λόγον*, as used in the Platonic dialogues, usually means "to give a discursive account of oneself that justifies what one thinks or does by reference to good reasons". By contrast, when Pindar likens Oedipus to "a great oak tree" which despite being forcefully removed from its natural context is nonetheless able to *διδόναι ψῆφον* by serving as a palace pillar or means of heating in the winter, this is meant "in the sense in which we speak of a boxer giving a good account of himself in the ring". The oak tree 'puts itself to the vote' (*psēphos*) and invites others to judge if it serves a useful function (Geuss 2014, 212–213).

50 They have been raised by, among others, Morrison 1941, 8–9; Taylor 1976, 71–72; 82–83; Frede 1992, xx; Schofield 2006, 129.

It is first and foremost the sophist's argument for collective learning processes and experience as the source of expert authority that becomes the main target later in the dialogue.

To be sure, in the long, but lively, discussion that follows Protagoras' Great Speech, Socrates does not immediately confront the sophist's position head-on. For a time, in fact, he seems content with what looks like a change of both topic and gear: he embarks on a surprisingly technical and distinctively Socratic investigation into the unity of different virtues (328d–334c), and joins with Protagoras in an exercise in poetic exegesis, each of them offering rival interpretations of a Simonides poem (338e–347a). Moreover, considerable space is taken up by dramatic (and highly amusing) intermezzos, with the participants and their audience arguing about the proper method and ethics of philosophical debate.⁵¹ Given these extended detours and digressions, it is not surprising that Socrates takes pains to flag up the moment when the discussion does return to address issues that are of central importance to Protagoras' position. Like a doctor who has, up to this point, only been evaluating the health of the patient by “examining his face and extremities” and now wishes to see “the chest and the back, so as to make a better examination”, Socrates asks Protagoras to “reveal his thoughts” on a philosophically ‘vital’ question (352a1–b1). The question concerns the phenomenon that the philosophical tradition, following Aristotle, has come to know as *akrasia*. The many, Socrates says, believe that “most people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it”, and go on to explain this unwillingness as the result of “having been overcome by pleasure or pain” (352d6–e2). He then gets Protagoras to enthusiastically agree with him that this popular view should be rejected (352c–d). Their common rejection sets the stage for Socrates' subsequent argument: what he and Protagoras need is an alternative account of the experience commonly interpreted as “being overcome by pleasure or pain” (352e5–353a6). “Protagoras and Socrates”, the

51 I do not mean to suggest that all or any of these passages are unimportant, nor that they do not somehow touch on issues that come up in the Great Speech. (Even if I did, that would not detract from the literary value of the intermezzos: the caricatures of the famous sophists, in particular, are hilarious.) Indeed, a comprehensive reading of the *Protagoras* would naturally require a detailed discussion of how each of them can be seen to contribute, dramatically and philosophically, to Socrates' *Auseinandersetzung* with the famous sophist. Such a comprehensive reading, however, cannot be undertaken within the framework of this book. At any rate, my claim is that the core of Protagoras' position, his conception of *technē* and expert authority, is not directly and explicitly addressed until we get to the discussion of *akrasia*.

many are imagined to be asking, “if this thing we experience is not being overcome by pleasure, what is it then? What do you say it is? Tell us!” (357c6–d1).

We may initially wonder why Protagoras is so ready to join Socrates in his controversial denial of what is after all a well-known phenomenon. Protagoras offers the following explanation for his agreement with Socrates: “It would”, he says, “be shameful indeed, for me above all people, to say that wisdom and knowledge are anything but the most powerful forces in human affairs” (c8–d3). Why is this so? Here is where it becomes important to see Protagoras in his larger historical and intellectual context. The early generation of the ‘sophistic enlightenment’, Edward Hussey writes, was characterised by a distinctive “spirit of optimism about the human race and its capacity for wisdom, skill and social harmony” which expressed itself as “a faith in the ability of the human mind to surmount almost all obstacles by intelligence, especially when intelligence was accumulated and organised as a body of skill and knowledge, as a *technē*” (1972, 114). As E.R. Dodds remarks, while this mid-fifth century optimism is perhaps “pathetic in retrospect”, it is “historically intelligible” in a generation of intellectuals “who had witnessed the swift growth of material prosperity after the glorious Persian Wars, and the unexampled flowering of the spirit that accompanied it, culminating in the unique achievement of Periclean Athens” (1951, 183).⁵² Thus when Plato has Protagoras explain the rise of civilisation as a process of progressive learning, continuously reproduced within the ‘craftsman community’ of human society, he portrays the sophist, the oldest among those present (317d), as very much a child of his time.⁵³ In the Great Speech, human intellect and capacity for learning are given a prominent, even exalted, role as the saviour of mankind. Human knowledge, in the form of “the wisdom embedded in craftsmanship” (τὴν ἐντεχνον σοφίαν, 321d1), is what sets us free (εὐπορία, e3) from the brutish necessity of the original condition and serves to distinguish us from the animals. Moreover, the faith in this human intellectual capacity is so strong that Protagoras, throughout his speech, can assume it

52 On the optimism of pre-Peloponnesian war Athens as reflecting a widespread “Könnensbewusstsein” (a sense of technical and intellectual self-confidence associated with the notion of *technē*): Meier 1983, 479–481.

53 As Nussbaum rightly notes about the *Protagoras*, “[i]t is no surprise that the dialogue compares Socrates’ interview with these sophists to a living hero’s visit to the shades of dead heroes in the underworld. It is a dead generation, lacking understanding of the moral crisis of its own time” (1986, 105–106). Cf. Kahn 1981, 106–107. While Plato certainly knew that there could be no return to this *Welt von Gestern*, it is impossible to read the *Protagoras* without sensing an unmistakable touch of nostalgia.

to be sufficient for mankind's cultural and civilisational triumphs. "Technical craftsmanship was sufficient help [ἱκανὴ βοήθης] for them in obtaining food", he says (322b3–4), and the assumption seems to be that the same holds for the political craft in the realm of communal life. The fact that every member of society is taught political expertise is, he seems to believe, sufficient for successful social and political association. Whereas the early humans wronged each other when they tried to live together, we today can enjoy the security of communal life simply because we have *learned* the *technē* of living together as citizens.

The notion of *akrasia* seems to challenge this optimistic outlook. Here is how Socrates initially introduces the question to Protagoras:

What do you think about knowledge? Do you agree with the majority on this, or not? Most people think this way about it, that it is not something strong, neither something fit for taking the lead nor for ruling [οὐδ' ἡγεμονικὸν οὐδ' ἀρχικόν]. They do not think of it at all in that way, but rather in this way: while knowledge is often present in man, what rules him is not knowledge but rather something else—sometimes anger, sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear. They think of knowledge as being dragged around by all these other things, just as if it were a slave [ὥσπερ περὶ ἀνδραπόδου]. Now, does the matter seem that way to you too, or does it seem to you that knowledge is something fine and capable of ruling the person [οἶον ἄρχειν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου], and that when someone knows what is good and bad, then he will not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and intelligence would be sufficient to help the person [ἱκανὴν εἶναι τὴν φρόνησιν βοηθεῖν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ]?

Prot. 352b1–c7; trans. LOMBARDO/BELL, modified

On the *akrasia* model, rather than being "something fine and capable of ruling", human intellect is something weak and submissive, unfit "to take the lead" for man. Instead of being the agent of human emancipation from the brutish condition that originally prevailed, it is like a "slave" of irrational and brutish passions. Both Protagoras and Socrates seem to understand this view as aimed directly at the Great Speech. The sophist recognises that what is at stake is the role of "wisdom" (σοφίαν) in "human affairs" (τῶν ἀνθρωπείων πραγμάτων, 352d1–3); and Socrates, too, recalls the *muthos* when he suggests that the view under consideration denies that "intelligence is sufficient to help the human being [ἱκανὴν εἶναι τὴν φρόνησιν βοηθεῖν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ]". Protagoras' argument rested on the optimistic assumption that the common learning and teaching of

a useful craft would be enough to satisfactorily explain successful communal life, but the theory of *akrasia* threatens to pull away the carpet from under this assumption. It is passion, not intellect, that governs human affairs. If human knowledge is “not something strong, neither something fit for taking the lead nor for ruling”, why should we believe it a sufficient condition for communal life that we are all simply *taught* some expertise?⁵⁴ How can invoking the model of a ‘craftsman community’ be enough to account for the origin and nature of human society?⁵⁵

Socrates’ suggested solution to the problem of *akrasia* consists in developing, on his own and Protagoras’ behalf, an alternative, strongly intellectualist theory of wrongdoing. Contrary to the popular view, he argues, we in fact always do what we believe to be best and no one acts contrary to his own belief in this regard. As Michael Frede puts it, Socrates assumes that “somebody who, on the face of it, believes that he should do x because it is good, but nevertheless fails to do it, does not really believe that to do x is good, but believes that, on balance, to do x is bad” (1992, xxix). On this model, then, failure to do the right thing must be explained in terms having the wrong belief about what is good, rather than being overcome by pleasure or pain. But what is the cause of such wrong belief? This question is what allows Socrates to introduce a fundamental distinction between reality and appearance. Socrates imagines himself asking the many:

54 Shortly after, Socrates explicitly suggests that a belief in *akrasia* leads people to mistrust the optimistic assumptions underlying the sophists’ educational program: to live a good life free of irrational passions, the believer in *akrasia* would conclude, is “not something that can be taught” (ὁ δὲ διδάκτοῦ ὄντος, 357e6–7).

55 By holding up on the phenomenon of *akrasia* as a problem for Protagoras’ position, Socrates is giving voice to what seems to have been a general trope in the reaction to the outlook of which the sophist was a representative. The notion of *akrasia* played a prominent role in the late fifth century backlash against what was by then perceived as the unfounded optimism of the pre-war generation of intellectuals. Euripides, proposing a far more pessimistic view of reason and intellect in human affairs, made several of his tragedies revolve around the explicitly acknowledged ‘acritic’ predicament of his (female) characters. Phaedra complains that “we know and understand what is good, but do not go through on it. Some fail from laziness, others because they give precedence to some other pleasure than being honorable” (*Hipp.* 380–383; cf. *Medea* 1078–1080). Cf. Dodds 1951, 187; 188; Romilly 1992, 51–52. See Bär 2012 for the Euripidean “Kulturpessimismus” as directed against an optimistic *Kulturgeschichte* associated explicitly with Protagoras. On the general change of intellectual atmosphere in Athens in the last third of the fifth century: Meier 1983, 481–482.

‘Do things of the same size appear to you [φαίνεται ὑμῖν] larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from a distance, or not?’ They would say they do. ‘And similarly for thickness and pluralities? And equal sounds seem louder when near at hand, softer when farther away?’ They would agree. ‘If then to do well depended upon this, doing and choosing large things and avoiding and not doing the small ones, what would we see as our salvation in life [ἡμῖν σωτηρία ἐφάνη τοῦ βίου]? Would it be the art of measurement or the power of appearance [ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις]? While the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion [ἡμᾶς ἐπλάνα καὶ ἐποίει ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω], often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement, in contrast, would make appearance [τὸ φάντασμα] lose its authority [ἄκυρον] by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth [μένουσιν ἐπὶ τῷ ἀληθεῖ] and would save our life’.

Prot. 356c8–e4; trans. LOMBARDO/BELL, modified

Wrongdoing, on this model, is a matter of being deceived by appearances, as when I declare my coffee cup to be larger than the tree in the garden because the latter is farther away. Likewise, due to relative proximity, pursuing some good (x) today might falsely appear better than pursuing some other good (y) tomorrow. But note that Socrates’ choice of the example of visual and auditory illusion to make this point is far from fortuitous. After all, this is an area where, to cite Frede again, “phenomena are systematically misleading; hence the beliefs based on them are systematically misguided” (1992, xxx). Now, at this point Protagoras would surely have done well to remind Socrates that not all appearances are like visual and audible appearances in this respect. It is not at all clear that what ‘appears’ to democratic citizens concerning “the management of political affairs” (319d1) and what ‘appears’ to Protagoras’ students concerning the value of his teaching (328b4–5) are also forms of appearance that systematically mislead us in the way visual appearances mislead us about size and distance. But Protagoras does not make this point, and so Socrates can go on to draw a general conclusion from his examples: There is no reliable guidance to be had in following appearances. Rather, the remedy for their deception is a form of independent knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, 357a1), called the art of measurement (ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη, 356d4), which allows us to go behind mere appearance and compare current and future goods in accordance with their true quantities. Thus the phenomenon the many wrongly interpreted as ‘being overcome by pleasure’ can be explained as caused by the lack of knowledge

(ἀμαθία, 357d1), rather than by the relative weakness of human intellect *vis-à-vis* other, more powerful forces in human life.⁵⁶

Socrates' argument does provide a way to defend an optimistic view of the role of reason in human affairs. But it is clear that, for Protagoras, this defence comes at a high price. The sophist had based his conception of expert authority in the Great Speech on a particular conception of the character of democratic political life. At the heart of democracy is not a chaotic diversity of arbitrary beliefs and points of view. Rather, Protagoras' claim to be an expert was, he argued, vindicated by its being the continuation of an ancient craft, collectively shared and practiced by all members of society, and which has proven itself by its perceived usefulness. In this sense, then, Protagoras' conception of expert authority was grounded in something like 'accumulated appearance', that is, in how certain beliefs and practices have systematically appeared and do appear to people. Expert authority, in short, derives from appearance. But Socrates' argument attempts to undermine this position. When the distinction between appearance and reality is introduced in order to provide a systematic explanation of the phenomenon of *wrongdoing*, appearance itself comes to play a role very different from the one assigned to it in Protagoras' vision of democracy. It is "the power of appearance", Socrates says, "that makes us wander [ἐπλάννα] all over the place in confusion [ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω], often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small" (356d4–7). Here we are back in the world of *Republic* 8 and its portrayal of democratic life: by putting each 'appearance' on an equal footing democracy becomes characterised by capriciousness and randomness. In fact, Plato often has Socrates associate the beliefs of ordinary people with this notion of aimless 'wandering'. "On these matters [sc. justice and injustice]", he says in the *Hippias Minor*, "I wander all over the place [ἄνω καὶ κάτω πλανῶμαι] and never believe the same thing. But that is no surprise in the case of myself or any other ordinary man [ἄλλον ἰδιώτην]" (*Hipp. Min.* 376c2–4). In the *Republic*, likewise, popular opinion belongs in the class of "what is believed" (δοξαστὸν)

56 As a glance at the literature on this part of the *Protagoras* will establish, Socrates' argument raises a veritable plethora of questions and problems. I have given what I hope to be a relatively uncontroversial, if necessarily simplified, paraphrase of the main strategy. For lucid (and critical) discussions of this less than lucid passage see Frede 1992, xxvii–xxx; Manuwald 1999, 393–401. It has long and often been a particular source of puzzlement that Socrates pursues the argument summarized in this paragraph on the hedonistic assumption that *pleasure* is the good. (E.g. Hackforth 1928.) But it is important to note that Socrates does not actually need this assumption in order to make his argument work (cf. Frede 1992, xxxi), which is why I have left out the hedonistic element here.

and equated with “what is wandering [πλανητὸν]” (*Resp.* 479d3–9). It is, then, with clear political overtones that Socrates goes on to introduce his own solution in the *Protagoras*: if we want to “save ourselves” by reason and *technē*, we need to reject the “authority” of appearance (make it ἄκυρον, a term with strong political connotations) and anchor our conception of the source of expert authority in something more robust. We need expert authority to be based on insight into the reality of things, “remaining firmly by the truth” (μένουσσαν ἐπὶ τῷ ἀληθεῖ), rather than by how they might happen to appear to people. Socrates provides an unmistakable hint at what the real target of his argument is here. For his introduction of the objective “art of measurement” that “shows us the truth” serves to recall and replace Protagoras’ own measure doctrine, behind which lurked the principle of Athenian *isēgoria*.⁵⁷ By insisting that expert authority must derive from a grasp of what is true, rather than what merely seems or appears, Socrates implies that such authority will be hard to square with the egalitarianism of judgments found in both Protagoras’ famous doctrine and in democratic practice.

Towards the *Theaetetus*

This, then, is Socrates’ strategy in the *Protagoras* for refuting Protagoras’ vision of democracy as epistemically competent and his own claim to expert authority. The public realm of ordinary appearance and belief, he argues against the sophist, offers no secure ground on which to base an adequate conception of political *technē*. However, the reader might perhaps have discerned another way in which Socrates’ introduction of the phenomenon of *akrasia* might threaten to undermine Protagoras’ argument. The pessimistic view of human intellect, as we saw, was attributed by Socrates to “the many”, and Protagoras reacts to this problematic view by dismissively questioning the credibility of popular opinion: “I think people say a lot of things that are not right, Socrates” (352e3–4). Likewise, when Socrates insists on taking up the discus-

57 Socrates’ “art of measurement” has, of course, often been read as critically responding to the measure doctrine, e.g. Denyer 2008, 192. But since scholars have not been able to discern that doctrine in the *Protagoras* itself they have been uncertain as to the relation between Socrates’ allusion and the argument of the dialogue as a whole. Gagarin has attempted to read Socrates’ μετρητική τέχνη as *supporting* Protagoras’ measure doctrine as presented in the *Theaetetus*, rather than as a challenge to it (1969, 158–159). But his argument seems to rest on a misunderstanding of Protagoras’ doctrine and its explicit denial of *objective* measurement, as opposed to measuring appearance.

sion of *akrasia* the sophist asks: “why is it necessary for us to investigate the opinion of the many, who will say whatever occurs to them?” (353a7–8). Of course, falling as they do among a distinguished elite audience in the house of the wealthiest man in Athens, such statements are perhaps not surprising. However, given Protagoras’ conception of expert authority in the Great Speech, they are the expression of a view that might be more problematic for him than he is allowed to realise here. After all, was his own authority as an expert not supposed to derive from shared experience and collective learning? In this way, the discussion in the *Protagoras* points to a potential weakness in Protagoras’ position that it does not explicitly address. Protagoras might be able to construe a conception of expert authority that is compatible with a commitment to democratic *isēgoria* as ‘wise’. But what does this conception imply for the possibility of *disagreement* between popular belief and Protagoras himself? The famous sophist, visiting Athens at the peak of both his powers and hers, is not confronted with this question in his discussion with Socrates. But in the *Theaetetus* it comes back to haunt him, posthumously.

Self-Refuting Wisdom: Turning the Tables on Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*

The *Theaetetus*, unlike the other dialogues discussed in this book, does not openly announce itself as dealing with questions of a political character, let alone with the question of democracy and its relation to political *technē*. Thus when it takes up for critical discussion Protagoras' famous measure doctrine it is first and foremost as a purely epistemological position, a claim about what knowledge is. However, as I argued in the previous chapter on the *Protagoras*, Plato saw a close connection between that doctrine and the egalitarianism characteristic of democratic politics. Coming from the *Protagoras*, then, it would not be surprising to find a political undercurrent to the ostensibly epistemological discussion of the measure doctrine in the *Theaetetus*. In fact, I will argue that sensitivity to this possibility is essential to making sense of the argument in this dialogue. My central claim is that Socrates' main argument against Protagoras, the so-called 'self-refutation argument', can only be made to work once we recognize that the position it is intended to refute is the distinctive conception of expert authority that the sophist defends in both the *Protagoras* and (as we shall see) the *Theaetetus*. This in turn gives Socrates' refutation unmistakable political bite. It is not just the refutation of what initially looks like an utterly eccentric epistemological position. It is the refutation of what Plato arguably saw as the theoretically most sophisticated case that could be made for the reconciliation of democracy with political expertise.

Reaching this conclusion will require quite a lot of groundwork, however. For in addition to being one of the most interesting passages in Plato, the discussion of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is also one of those that have, in my view, been the least well understood. In order to understand the political undercurrents of Socrates' engagement with Protagoras in this dialogue we need to undertake a number of close and somewhat technical readings of crucial stages of the argument. But it is worth it. For what emerges is perhaps Plato's most forceful and subtle criticism of the Protagorean position and its social pragmatist conception of expert authority.

Minding the Gap

In the literature on the *Theaetetus*, Socrates' so-called 'self-refutation argument' (*Theaet.* 170a3–171c7) has traditionally been received with a mixture of fascination and dissatisfaction. Fascination at what appears to be the first recorded instance of an argument of this kind, which attempts to show how a philosophical position must be rejected because it somehow undermines itself.¹ Dissatisfaction because it is generally thought that Socrates is ultimately unsuccessful, or at least only partly successful, in showing that this is in fact so in the case of Protagoras' famous 'measure doctrine'. In the *Theaetetus* this doctrine is interpreted as rejecting objective, non-relativistic truth by stating that whatever appears or seems to each person is so for that person.² Socrates' self-refutation argument against Protagoras' doctrine is usually reconstructed along the following lines. Protagoras, Socrates begins, will hardly deny that people in fact generally disagree with his measure doctrine: they all think that there are many areas of life where some, the experts, are wiser than others and that the difference between them is that the former have "true reasoning" (ἀληθῆ δικά-voιαν) whereas the latter have "false belief" (ψευδῆ δόξαν, 170a6–b11). However,

1 For the subsequent history of self-refutation arguments in Greek philosophy see Burnyeat 1976b; Lee 2005; Castagnoli 2010.

2 In thus taking Protagoras' measure doctrine, as understood by Plato in the *Theaetetus*, as a statement of *relativism* I follow the standard interpretation represented by Burnyeat 1976a and 1990. (Cf. previous chapter, note 2.) Fine has argued that we should rather understand the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* as an *infallibilist*, by which she means someone who holds that whatever appears or seems to each person is true *simpliciter* (rather than true *for that person*). Fine's main argument for this reading is that it makes better sense of Plato's association of Protagoras' position with Heraclitean flux theory, which, being an ontology, makes an absolute claim about reality that would be anathema to a relativist (2003, 141–145; 188–190). But Fine's argument rests on the highly questionable assumption that Plato's *only* reason for introducing flux theory is to support or defend Protagoras' doctrine. However, as the later discussion shows, Plato was greatly interested in the epistemological implications of flux theory quite independently of its association with Protagoras (179c–183c), and although the playful talk of a Protagorean 'secret doctrine' suggests a strong connection between the two, it is later suggested that what connects them is really only that they are different attempts at making sense of Theaetetus' claim that knowledge is perception (160d5–e4; 168b2–7; 179c7–d4). Thus we cannot simply assume, with Fine, that flux theory must necessarily be wholly compatible with Protagoras' doctrine. I will argue that Socrates' reason for associating flux theory with Protagoras, in particular, is that it brings out the element of arbitrariness he—initially, at least—takes to be implied by the measure doctrine.

once this reasonable assumption is accepted, Protagoras' position faces a problem, given his commitment to the measure doctrine that every belief is true for the holder. Myles Burnyeat summarizes the central move of the argument:

If some people are right to think that there is false judgment, there is. But equally, if they are wrong in this belief, there is false judgment (for here is an instance of it). But Protagoras must say—must he not?—either that they are right or that they are wrong: unless he is willing to go so far as to deny that people do hold this view about each other's ignorance and expertise. To deny that, Theodorus agrees, would be quite implausible (170c). So Protagoras is caught in a dilemma. Whichever answer he gives has the consequence that false judgment occurs, which the measure doctrine must deny.

BURNEYAT 1990, 28–29

As Burnyeat hints in his summary, there is something amiss with this argument, and it is often remarked how the problem manifests itself, in the text, in the way Socrates handles the qualifying phrase 'for x', which, on the measure doctrine, serves to indicate that any given belief is true *for the person who has it*. This qualification is firmly in place when Socrates has Theodorus agree (on Protagoras' behalf) that, whereas the measure doctrine is true for the sophist himself, it is false for people generally (170e4–5; cf. 170a3–b11). But then, at a crucial moment (171a8; b2), the qualification is suddenly dropped and Protagoras is, apparently, made to speak about truth and falsehood in non-relativized terms: if he is to follow his own doctrine, Socrates argues, he must admit that the people who believe that there are false beliefs, i.e. reject the measure doctrine, believe what is true (no qualification!). This admission on Protagoras' part is fatal, however. For the consequence, Socrates concludes as he discreetly reintroduces the qualifying phrase, is that the measure doctrine ceases to be true for anyone at all, either for Protagoras or for anyone else (171c5–7).³

3 Note that in this paragraph I treat as one single argument what scholars, including Burnyeat, have sometimes separated into two versions of what is basically the same argument and the same basic problem: 170c2–d2 and 170e7–171c7 (e.g. Burnyeat 1990, 28–29; Sedley 2004, 57–62). *Pace* these scholars, I fail to see why the premise of the second version ('the many reject the measure doctrine') should be significantly different from that of first ('the many believe in the possibility of false beliefs'), which is what would make them into two separate arguments. After all, Socrates is hardly suggesting that the many reject the measure doctrine *under that description*. (That would be implausible: most people would presumably never

On this traditional reconstruction of the self-refutation argument, the problem then is that there seems to be a serious gap in Socrates' reasoning. For it is far from clear why Protagoras could not simply admit that people's belief (that the measure doctrine is false) is true *for them* while maintaining that the doctrine is nonetheless true *for him*. In other words, it is unclear why his admission that someone's belief is true for that person should require that he *himself* adopt that belief as true *for him*.⁴ As McDowell notes, there might of course be other reasons why Socrates' argument leaves Protagoras in a vulnerable position. For instance, if all he can do is to insist that the measure doctrine is true *for him*, though it might not be so for anyone else, that might seem to detract from the relevance of his theory for anyone but himself, and "we are justified in wondering why we should find what he says interesting" (McDowell 1973, 171).⁵ However, as McDowell himself recognizes, whatever the force of this kind of consideration, it is not the point Socrates in fact makes in the self-refutation argument from the *Theaetetus*. For there, as we saw, he seems to believe that he has made a much stronger point, namely, to have shown how

have heard of it.) Rather, he is (rightly) assuming that to believe in the possibility of false beliefs *is* to reject the measure doctrine. However, this is not to say that Socrates merely repeats himself in these two passages. As I understand it, the first passage merely *asserts*, by way of anticipation, that Protagoras' position is vulnerable to self-refutation (it is presented as something to be explained, not as a conclusion), and it is only in the second passage that we get the actual argument. I will therefore concentrate on the second passage (170e7–171c7) in what follows.

- 4 For this criticism see e.g. Grote 1875, 111.143; Vlastos 1956, xiv n27; McDowell 1973, 165–167; Burnyeat 1990, 28–30; Zilioli 2007, 136. Cf. Lee 2005, 48. In a 1976 article (1976b; followed by Sedley 2004, 57–61) Burnyeat argued for a reading of the self-refutation argument that avoids this problem by interpreting Protagoras' measure doctrine as a theory of 'private worlds': in Protagoras' private world it is the case that (a) many people hold the measure doctrine to be false, and (b) all people have true beliefs; so Protagoras has to admit that, in his private world, the belief that the measure doctrine is false is true. My concern with the solution offered by Burnyeat and Sedley is primarily one of economy. Though perhaps possible, their solution risks turning a line of reasoning that is presented as fairly straightforward (and accepted as such by Theodorus) into a very complicated argument that requires us to switch, often without warning, between Protagoras' own 'private world' and a general perspective across 'private worlds' (as acknowledged by Sedley 2004, 61; cf. Zilioli 2007, 137–139). I take it to be a strength of my interpretation that it avoids this. (Does Burnyeat's choice to downplay the earlier article in his long 1990 introduction to the dialogue perhaps indicate that he was himself not wholly satisfied with the solution it offered?)
- 5 Cf. also Burnyeat 1976b, 191–192; Lee 2005, 54–57. Lee takes this outcome to be sufficient for refuting Protagoras himself, if not his measure doctrine.

Protagoras' rejection of the measure doctrine as true for him somehow *follows from* his admission that it is false for people generally. And so the problematic gap remains.

I think the term 'gap' is particularly appropriate in this case. For the problem with the self-refutation argument, on the traditional construal, is that something really does seem to be missing if the argument is to work: something in Protagoras' own position that would warrant the crucial move from his admission that the measure doctrine is false for others to the adoption, on his own part, of that belief (i.e. admitting that it is false for him too). What I want to suggest, accordingly, is that the cause of the perceived problem in Socrates' argument is a mistaken assumption about the character of the Protagorean position that is being refuted. Common to most, if not all, previous interpretations of the argument is the contention that, although the self-refutation argument comes *after* Protagoras' so-called 'defense speech' in 166a–168c, the position to be refuted is the measure doctrine as we found it discussed *prior* to that speech. In other words, on the common reading the self-refutation argument proceeds as if there had been no defense speech at all. In this chapter, I wish to present an alternative way of understanding Socrates' argument and the position it is intended to undermine. On my reading, the position being refuted in the self-refutation argument is precisely the measure doctrine *as it has just been explained and defended by Protagoras in his defense speech*. That is, I think, what bridges the 'gap' and makes the argument work. For in his defense speech Protagoras explains the measure doctrine as a distinctive theory of wisdom, and it is in this capacity that it is subsequently refuted by Socrates. However, the strength of this reading, I hope to show, is not only that it avoids the unsatisfactory conclusion that Socrates' argument is conspicuously fallacious. It also makes much better sense of that argument as a sincere and forceful objection to what the sophist himself is made to hold out as the strongest case that can be made for him, rather than as an argument that uncharitably ignores that case and focuses merely on a simplified version of his position.

Prelude to the Self-Refutation Argument (169d3–170a5)

The reason why readers have often misidentified the target of the self-refutation argument is, I think, that the crucial passage that introduces and motivates that argument has not been well understood. For unlike in the case of the self-refutation argument itself, the details of this passage are rarely adequately discussed and the received understanding of it too often taken for granted in the literature. The short passage in question is 169d3–170a5 and follows almost

immediately upon Protagoras' defense speech (166a–168c), where the sophist is presented as defending his measure doctrine against Socrates' objection that it is incompatible with wisdom, including the sophist's own.⁶ I leave part of the passage untranslated, since much hinges on the translation.

Socrates: Let's begin, then, by taking up again the same point as before.

καὶ ἴδωμεν ὀρθῶς ἢ οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἐδυσχεραίνομεν ἐπιτιμῶντες τῷ λόγῳ ὅτι
αὐτάρκη ἕκαστον εἰς φρόνησιν ἐποίει, καὶ ἡμῖν συνεχώρησεν ὁ Πρωταγόρας
περὶ τε τοῦ ἀμείνονος καὶ χείρονος διαφέρειν τινάς, οὓς δὴ καὶ εἶναι σοφοὺς.
οὐχί;

Theodorus: Yes.

Socrates: If he were present here himself to agree with us, and we hadn't conceded on his behalf in an attempt to defend him, there would be no need of taking it up again and establishing it with certainty; but, as it is, it might be said that we have no authority to make this agreement on his behalf. Therefore it is better if we can come to agree more clearly on this particular point. For it makes no small difference whether this is so or not.

Theodorus: That's true.

Socrates: Let us, then, as briefly as possible, obtain this agreement, not through others, but from his own argument [ἐκ τοῦ ἐκείνου λόγου].

Theodorus: How?

Socrates: Like this: he says, doesn't he, that what seems to each also is for the person to whom it seems?

Theodorus: He does.

Theaet. 169d3–170a5

Let us begin with what is uncontested (and, as far as I know, uncontested) about the passage. As is clear from Socrates' second contribution, what he suggests is that the aim of the following argument should be to establish "with certainty" Protagoras' "agreement" on some particularly important point. As he points out, this certainty cannot be had if he and Theodorus were simply to make the agreement on Protagoras' behalf. For someone might object that they are unauthorized to speak for him on this crucial point. Socrates accordingly suggests that, in order to avoid this accusation, they should attempt to obtain Protagoras' agreement "from his own argument", by which, as the immediately subsequent lines show, he means the measure doctrine. Two questions

6 The details of the defense speech will be discussed below.

naturally present themselves here: 1) what is the point on which Socrates wants Protagoras' agreement? And 2) what is meant by the suggestion that he wants to obtain agreement on that point from Protagoras' "own argument" in the form of the measure doctrine? It is in answering these questions that I believe many commentators have been misled in a way that, in turn, leads them to an unsatisfactory understanding of the subsequent self-refutation argument. As will be clear, our answer to the first question has implications for how we would be inclined to answer the second.

How we answer the first question depends crucially on how we construe the lines I have left untranslated above (169d3–8). The Greek allows for two different construals.⁷ On both of them, the required agreement concerns a point about Protagoras' previous defense speech (166c9–167d5), but there is an important difference in what that point is taken to be. On one common construal, the phrase ἴδωμεν ὁρθῶς ἢ οὐκ ὁρθῶς governs only the first of the two verbs (ἔδυσχεραίνομεν), while the second verb (συνεχώρησεν) is taken to introduce a new and independent question. Accordingly, the translation would be something like:

Socrates: (...) We should investigate whether we were right or not to be discontent and criticize the theory for making everyone self-sufficient in wisdom. Now, Protagoras conceded to us that some people distinguish themselves from others concerning what is better and worse and that these are the wise. Isn't that so?

Theodorus: Yes.

On this construal,⁸ Socrates makes an assumption about what he had Protagoras do in the defense speech and then wants to have it independently justified that he (Socrates) was right to do so. That is, he takes it as given that Protagoras (in the defense speech) did in fact "concede" (συνεχώρησεν) that some people are wiser than others concerning what is better and worse, when he defended himself in his own voice against Socrates' objection that the measure doctrine "makes everyone self-sufficient in wisdom". The required "agreement", then, concerns Socrates' question as to whether he was justified in having Protagoras make that concession. (After all, someone might claim that he and Theodorus are not authorized to make such a concession on Protagoras' behalf in an attempt to defend him.) This reading has implications for how we take

7 For the possibility of two alternative construals see McDowell 1973, 111.

8 Adopted by McDowell (1973, 44) and Cornford (1935, 77).

Socrates' proposal that they obtain Protagoras' agreement "from his own argument". For if what Socrates wants is an *independent* justification of what he has *already* had Protagoras do in the defense speech, then it is natural to understand the proposal as a suggestion that we put that defense aside and secure the required agreement solely on the basis of the bare Protagorean maxim we started out with. That is, the suggestion is that we look at the measure doctrine *without the context provided by the defense speech*. It is on the basis of this assumption that many readers have approached the subsequent self-refutation argument (as I mentioned above).

There are, however, a number of problems with this way of taking the sentence. The first is a matter of making sense of Socrates' motivations for doing what he does at this point. For, as even some commentators who are inclined to the above reading have been ready to admit, there is something unsatisfactory about Socrates' procedure here. He first puts an elaborate defense in Protagoras' mouth, meant to explain and defend the measure doctrine within its intended Protagorean context, only to suggest, immediately afterwards, that he (Socrates) was not authorized to speak for Protagoras after all. So we are asked to dismiss the whole speech and return, again, to the maxim with which we started, without the important context we have just been given.⁹ Moreover, there is something awkward about the suggestion that a worry about authorization is made to motivate the disavowal of the defense speech at this point. For the insistence that the discussion be conducted with respect for what the opponent really says is one that is *voiced by Protagoras* as an afterthought to his defense speech proper; it is Protagoras who is presented as criticising Socrates for manipulating his words and who asks Socrates to confine the investigation to "what [I am] really saying" (168b6). But then, on this first construal of the passage, Socrates' worry about whether he was really authorized to speak for Protagoras is motivated by an appeal that occurs in the very speech he was, apparently, unauthorized to give.

In addition to this inevitable sense of dissatisfaction about Socrates' procedure there are more tangible problems connected with the view that what Socrates asks for in our passage is an independent justification of something he had Protagoras do in the defense speech. Firstly, on this reading of the passage, Socrates assumes that Protagoras was presented as making a 'concession'

9 For F.C.S. Schiller, whose sympathy with Plato could fit into a matchbox, this was the last straw. "Nothing", he exclaims, "could be more unfair and unenlightened" (1908, 6). McDowell, more sympathetic to Plato, simply wonders why this move "is taken to be necessary" at this point (1973, 169).

to Socrates in the defense speech; what Socrates asks for is justification for having made the sophist do so. But this assumption is very hard to square with the language of the speech itself. There, Protagoras (as Socrates presents him) explicitly took himself to be able to successfully fend off Socrates' objection and reconcile the measure doctrine with the possibility of wisdom. He begins the speech by announcing that he is not at all worried about Socrates' objection that the measure doctrine is incompatible with the possibility of wisdom: "I maintain that truth is as I've written it!", he emphatically proclaims while maintaining that he is at the same time "far from denying that there are wisdom and wise men" (166c9–d5). Similarly, he self-confidently, almost arrogantly, concludes his defense: "in this way we can say that some are wiser than others *and* that no one has false beliefs. And you, Socrates, whether you like it or not, must put up with being a measure yourself. For by these arguments the theory is saved" (167d2–5). We may of course argue that, contrary to what Protagoras himself thinks, the defense speech does in fact *imply* a concession to Socrates because his conception of wisdom can be seen to compromise the measure doctrine.¹⁰ But this is not what is at issue. The point is that, on this first construal of 169d6–8, Socrates presents Protagoras as having performed a particular speech act ('conceding to Socrates') that he manifestly did not make.¹¹

This is connected with a second problem. On the construal of the passage under discussion, what the subsequent argument is supposed to yield, on independent grounds, is Protagoras' 'concession' that "some people distinguish themselves from others concerning what is better and worse and that these are the wise" (169d6–7). But this is strange for several reasons. First, if the argument were in fact to yield *that* result it would hardly amount to a concession. For (as we shall see in more detail later) Protagoras' strategy in the defense speech is exactly to explain wisdom in terms of better and worse so

10 And many have done so, e.g. McDowell 1973, 167; Burnyeat 1990, 26–27. More on this later.

11 It is true that συγχωρεῖν, in Greek, can also have the less defeatist and more neutral meaning "agree" or "consent to". But I believe it is clear from the context of the passage that Socrates uses it in the stronger sense of "concede" or "admit" here (as most, if not all, translators agree). The self-refutation argument, which is intended to address the question raised in 169d3–8, leads to the result that Protagoras must "concede" (συγχωρεῖ, 171a8; cf. b1) that his opponents' beliefs are true. What is meant is surely more than that he is merely "agreeing" with them. And when Socrates later constructs a modified version of the Protagorean position in light of that argument, he presents the sophist's 'concession' (171e4) as one that is made reluctantly (note the repeated use of εἴπερ πού in 171e8 and 172a6: "if anywhere, then here ..."). Thanks to Jacob Rosen for pressing me on this point.

as to avoid conceding to Socrates and compromising his measure doctrine. Commentators have often attempted to make sense of this by arguing, as mentioned above, that this defense strategy so obviously *implies* a (nonetheless somehow completely unacknowledged) concession on Protagoras' part that Socrates is justified in simply treating it as a concession, here, without further explanation.¹² But if this were really so, we would surely have expected him to point to that crucial implication; that is, we would have expected him to say something like 'in making wisdom a matter of better and worse didn't Protagoras concede to us that some beliefs are false?'. What we definitely would not expect him to do is to say that Protagoras "conceded" the very point he himself took to constitute his defense. Conversely, the result which the subsequent self-refutation argument does eventually yield is not that 'some people are wiser than others concerning what is better and worse'; rather, it is the much more damaging outcome that Protagoras must admit the possibility of false beliefs and that, therefore, he must reject the measure doctrine. So, on this common construal of our passage, there is a conspicuous mismatch between what the self-refutation argument is introduced to do and what it in fact does.¹³

However, there is a second way of construing the important sentence in 169d6–8 that can avoid these problems. On this alternative construal, instead of treating the second verb as introducing a new independent question, we treat the two verbs in the sentence as equally governed by ἵδωμεν ὁρθῶς ἢ οὐκ ὁρθῶς. Now the translation would be something like:

Socrates: (...) We should investigate whether we were right or not to be discontented and criticize the theory for making everyone self-sufficient in wisdom, and whether Protagoras was right or not to concede to us that some people distinguish themselves from others concerning what is better and worse and that these are the wise.

Shouldn't we?

Theodorus: Yes.

12 I believe it is far from clear that an implied concession is so obvious in the defense speech as it would need to be to allow Socrates to simply assume it at this point. I discuss the defense speech in detail below.

13 McDowell notes this discrepancy, but does not see it as significant because he subscribes to the view that Protagoras' speech was so obviously concessive that Socrates is justified in treating 'some are wiser than others concerning what is better and worse' as straightforwardly equivalent with the concession that 'there are false beliefs' (1973, 169).

Interestingly, although a number of translators have actually construed the sentence in this way, they nonetheless often attempt to read it in a way that makes its meaning similar to the first construal above. At the level of translation, this is done by discreetly changing the grammatical subject in the second part of the passage. Burnyeat, for instance, translates this part "... and whether we were right or wrong when *we made* Protagoras concede ..." (1990, 296; my emphasis). This, of course, gets us into the same problems as in the case of the first construal. For, again, it is taken as a given that Protagoras did in fact 'concede' (i.e. made the speech act 'concession') that wisdom is a matter of better and worse, and Socrates asks to have this concession justified on independent grounds.

It is, however, Protagoras, not Socrates and Theodorus, who is the subject of the second verb συνεχώρησεν (as in the translation given above).¹⁴ This allows for a different reading of the passage. For now the question becomes, not whether Socrates and Theodorus were right to do as they did, but whether Protagoras was right to do as *he* did. In other words, the question is raised from the perspective of Protagoras and his defense speech: given his declared aim of defending the measure doctrine as compatible with wisdom, was he right to do as he did in that speech? Is making wisdom a matter of better and worse the right thing to do if you want to maintain the measure doctrine? Importantly, with this reading of the passage we can steer clear of the problems raised above. Firstly, Socrates' suggestion that they "take up the same point again" and attempt to secure Protagoras' agreement "from his own argument" becomes both sincere and reasonable. Socrates is not suddenly, and for no very good reason, suggesting that they completely disregard and ignore the defense Protagoras has just been allowed to give. What he proposes to do is to investigate the consequences, for Protagoras' position, of that defense, that is, the consequences of making wisdom a matter of better and worse. Had Protagoras been present in person, they could have conducted the investigation in conversation with him and thus made sure to get his "agreement" with their conclusions. But since this is not the case, and in order to avoid the accusation that they are not authorized to speak for him on this question, the next best thing to do is to attempt to deduce that agreement "from his own argument".

Moreover, an attractive feature of this reading is that it makes much better sense of Protagoras' 'concession' here. It is not simply assumed that his claim that wisdom is a matter of better and worse in and of itself compromises his position, just as he clearly did not think it did. Rather, that is the very thing

14 This point is also clearly captured in Rowe's 2005 translation of the dialogue (Rowe 2005).

we must investigate. So when the term “conceded” (συνεχώρησεν) is used in the passage it is in a strictly anticipatory way: Protagoras’ claim that wisdom is a matter of better and worse has opened up what is perhaps a vulnerable flank in his position, and we must (Socrates says) investigate what the implications for him are. In other words, he has ‘conceded’ only in the sense that he has given Socrates something to pursue, a line of attack which might lead to his downfall.

This reading, which, I suggest, best makes sense of what Socrates says and does, has important implications for how we should understand the target of the self-refutation that follows. For, on this reading, as we saw, Socrates is not asking for independent justification of what he had Protagoras do in the speech; he is asking whether the claim made by Protagoras *in that speech* was a smart thing for him to do. This means that when Socrates suggests that they obtain Protagoras’ agreement “from his own argument” and then turns again to the measure doctrine, we are not meant to take this as suggesting that we look at the measure doctrine without the context provided by the defense speech. On the contrary, what Socrates is interested in is to investigate the consequences of Protagoras’ attempt to defend the doctrine by placing it in this context. In other words, what is to be refuted in the self-refutation argument is the measure doctrine *as it was defended and interpreted by Protagoras in his speech*. This is important. For, as I will argue, that insight holds the key to bridging the problematic ‘gap’ in the self-refutation argument. However, before we can turn to this, we must attempt to become clearer on Protagoras’ defense speech itself and the position expounded there.

Protagoras’ Defense (166c9–167d5)

Let us backtrack a bit and go over the discussion of Protagoras that leads up to the defense speech. Socrates begins the central part of the discussion of Protagoras and his measure doctrine by pointing out how that doctrine seems to stand in some tension with the way the sophist understands himself and his profession.

Now, what are we to say, Theodorus? If that belief is going to be true for each person which he holds from perception; if no one is going to be better at judging about someone else’s experience than he is, or more authoritative [κυριώτερος] in investigating whether someone else’s belief is true or false, but, as we’ve said many times, each person is going to be the sole judge of his own things, which are all right and true, then how, my friend, can Protagoras be wise, so that he can rightly consider himself

the teacher of others and worth high fees, whereas we're more ignorant, and have to turn to him [φοιτητέον ἡμῖν ἦν παρ' ἐκείνων], though each of us is the measure of his own wisdom?

Theaet. 161d1–e3

The question about wisdom and the measure doctrine, as we have already seen, is one about the problem of epistemic or expert authority. How, Socrates asks, can Protagoras reconcile his commitment to the measure doctrine with his assumption that wisdom, including his own as a teacher worth large fees from his students, is something that rightly calls for the recognition and compliance of others? If whatever “seems” to some individual person simply is so for that person, then it is hard to see how anyone—the expert—can claim any kind of authority (κυριώτερος) *vis-à-vis* other people, in any field. How can Protagoras explain why anyone would ever need to “turn to him” (φοιτητέον ... παρ' ἐκείνων), or to any other expert? Does not the measure doctrine give everybody exclusive access to their own truth?

In the *Theaetetus*, even though the sophist himself is long dead, Protagoras is, by means of a fictitious defense speech put in his mouth by Socrates, allowed to posthumously defend himself and his claim that the measure doctrine can indeed be reconciled with the possibility of epistemic authority (166c9–167d5). At the core of Protagoras' defense is his idea that wisdom should be understood in terms of value, not truth. The expert is not someone whose beliefs are “more true” than those of others or who makes those of others so; as the measure doctrine insists, all beliefs are true for the person who holds them. Rather, he is someone who brings about a change to what is “better” (βελτίω). Protagoras describes the activity of an expert:

It is not that someone who has false beliefs is later made by someone to have true ones. For it is impossible to believe what is not, or to have beliefs other than those one in fact entertains—and these beliefs are always true. Rather, I think, someone whose soul is in a pernicious state, and believes things akin to that condition, is made to have different beliefs due to a useful state of the soul. These latter appearances some, from inexperience, call ‘true’; but my position is that they are ‘better’ than the others [βελτίω], though in no way more ‘true’.

Theaet. 167a6–b4

According to Protagoras, this description of expertise—as changing appearances and beliefs for the better—applies not only to a teacher's relation to his pupil, but equally to all other instances of epistemic authority: a doctor

is someone who changes the appearances of his patient (166e2–167a6) and a good public speaker changes those of a city (167c2–7). He even, by what Cornford refers to as “an archaic touch” (1957, 72), describes gardeners as changing the sensations of plants (167b6–c2). By this general understanding of epistemic authority in terms of “better” and “worse” beliefs and appearances, not truth and falsehood, Protagoras claims to be able to successfully reconcile his measure doctrine with the assumptions that underlie his profession as an expert teacher (167c2–4).

In the literature, discussions of Protagoras’ speech have often focused on, and been somewhat skeptical about, the crucial distinction on which this defense rests: the distinction between *beliefs* (all of which are true for the holder) and the relative *value* of those beliefs (which is supposed to explain the possibility of epistemic authority). The question is how we should understand the status of the notion of the “better” that Protagoras uses to mark this distinction. Here, it has become common among commentators to argue that Protagoras’ different examples of expertise, in the speech, display a certain ambiguity on this critical issue.¹⁵ His first example is that of the doctor:

For remember what we were saying before, namely, that to the sick man the things he eats both appear and are bitter, while to the healthy man the both appear and are the opposite. So none of them should be made wiser than the other—for that is not possible—nor should accusations be made, calling the sick man ignorant for judging as he does, and the healthy man wise, because he judges differently. What is to be done is to make a change from the one to the other, because the other state is better.

Theaet. 166e2–167a3; trans. LEVETT/BURNYEAT, modified

First a small point about the relation of this passage to Protagoras’ over-all claim. For the central part of the passage might initially strike us as somewhat puzzling. After all, given that what Protagoras is attempting to explain is how some people are wiser than others, why does he now claim that neither of the two persons can be made wiser than the other? What, we might ask, hinders the patient himself from becoming a doctor? The solution to this problem is presumably to say that the lines should be read as closely linked with the example as a whole. Protagoras’ reference to “what we were saying before”

¹⁵ Among the scholars who share this view are McDowell (1973, 165–167), Burnyeat (1990, 25) and Farrar (1988, 68–69).

is to 159b–e.¹⁶ There the example of sick/healthy was juxtaposed with that of dreaming/being awake so as to illustrate the measure doctrine as applied to sense-perception: on that doctrine, the appearances of a sick person or of someone who is sleeping are no less true (for him) than those of a healthy or awake person (for him). In other words, the point is that, contrary to what we might be inclined to think, it is not the case that the latter pair has truer appearances than the former. It is in this context that we should understand the claim, in the above passage, that it is impossible to make one of the two persons wiser than the other. *If* a healthy man had truer appearances than a sick man, *then* to heal someone would be to make him wiser. But since this is not the case on Protagoras' theory, to heal someone cannot be to make him wiser. What Protagoras is denying, in other words, is that it is possible to make one man wiser than another *by healing him*.¹⁷

On this reading, the passage fits Protagoras' general argument, and we can turn to look at what it tells us about the details of that argument. The important thing about the example of the doctor and his patient for our understanding of Protagoras' position in the defense speech is how it treats the central notion of the 'better', which is intended to make epistemic authority compatible with the measure doctrine. In the example, I agree with most commentators, 'better' is clearly made relative to the judgment of the subject who undergoes the change: the food that previously appeared, and thus was, bitter to him, now appears, and is, sweet to him. And to taste sweet is presumably to taste 'better'. This, Protagoras seems to suggest, is the reason why the latter state is a "better state". Importantly, this construal of 'better' is thus fully in line with the measure doctrine that Protagoras is out to defend. He does not exempt belief about what is 'better' from being relative to the holder of that belief. One state is better for someone than another if and only if it seems to that person to be better. At this point in the speech, commentators agree, there is no sign of Protagoras wavering on his uncompromising commitment to the measure doctrine.¹⁸

However, when we turn to another of Protagoras' examples later in the speech, the same commentators have often found that he does seem to compromise his doctrine in such a way. To be sure, although the details are left somewhat vague, the examples of sophistic teachers (167a3–4) and gardeners (b7–c2) are clearly modeled on the doctor example and should presumably be taken in the same 'uncompromising' way. The problematic case is that of the

16 Cf. McDowell 1973, 167.

17 For a similar reading cf. McDowell 1973, 167.

18 My reading here is in line with the common reading: McDowell 1973, 166; Burnyeat 1990, 26.

“wise and good” public speakers, who are said by Protagoras to “make useful things seem just to cities instead of pernicious ones” (167c2–4). The problem is that on this example, it seems, the improvement that is supposed to be the effect of wisdom is presented as something that is independent of anyone’s believing such improvement to be the case. For, as it is often pointed out, what Protagoras seems to be claiming, here, is not that the new beliefs the speaker brings about in the city seem better to the city, but that *the better* is made to seem *just* to that city. In other words, ‘better’ is said of the things that are made to seem just to the city, not of the way certain things seem to that city. But this constitutes a fatal compromise of the measure doctrine. For it implies, in Burnyeat’s words, that “the new conventions are better whether they seem so or not” and thus introduces the notion of the ‘better’ as something “objective” (1990, 26), thus smuggling a notion of non-relativistic truth into Protagoras’ account. The common verdict on Protagoras’ defense as a whole, therefore, is that it is ambiguous on this crucial issue and ends up compromising the measure doctrine it was intended to defend.¹⁹

Against this widely shared view, I want to suggest that we should not be so quick to convict Protagoras of such grave ambiguity in a speech that is, after all, explicitly presented as an attempt to make his position “clearer” (σαφέστερον, 166e1–2). In fact, I do not think there is an ambiguity at work in the defense speech. Rather, I will argue that his position is coherent, and that, if it does compromise the measure doctrine, it falls to Socrates to show that this is so (which, as we saw above, is exactly what he proposes to do). The first thing to do is to take a close look at the public speaker-example, which is where Protagoras is believed to compromise his position. I cite the passage in its context:

For I say that they [gardeners], too, when plants are sickly, instill in them useful and healthy sensations and truths,²⁰ instead of pernicious ones [ἀντὶ πονηρῶν αἰσθήσεων ... χρηστὰς καὶ ὑγιεινὰς]; and likewise [δέ γε] the wise and good public speakers are those who make useful things seem just to cities instead of pernicious ones [ἀντὶ τῶν πονηρῶν]. For [ἐπεὶ] whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is so for that city and for as long as it is held to be so; but the wise man makes useful things seem and be for them instead of each of the pernicious ones [ἀντὶ πονηρῶν ὄντων

19 McDowell 1973, 166–167; Burnyeat 1990, 25–26.

20 I read ἀληθείας rather than the OCT’s ἀληθεῖς here, following the emendation proposed by Schleiermacher and argued for by Rowe (2005, 180).

αὐτοῖς ἐκάστων χρηστὰ]. In the same way [κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον], the sophistic teacher is able to educate ...

Theaet. 167b7–d1

The reason why the passage should be cited in its immediate context is that that helps us appreciate just how much Protagoras takes the public speaker example to be modeled on the ‘uncompromising’ understanding of wisdom with which he began the speech. It is treated as on a par with the gardener example, and is followed by a restatement of the example of education, introduced with “in the same way” (κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον). Both of these examples, as I pointed out above, were modeled on the ‘uncompromising’ doctor example (167a3–4; b6–7). Moreover, in the course of the short passage on the public speakers, Protagoras in fact drops the problematic reference to “the just” and switches back to the exact same (and unproblematic) formulation he used of the gardeners: the wise man is now simply someone who “makes useful things seem and be for them [the cities] instead of each of the pernicious ones” (ἀντὶ πονηρῶν ὄντων αὐτοῖς ἐκάστων χρηστὰ, c6–7; cf. the gardeners: ἀντὶ πονηρῶν αἰσθήσεων ... χρηστὰς καὶ ὑγιεινάς). Given this insistence on Protagoras’ part that the public speaker example is no different from the others, how should we make sense of the problematic phrase that the wise speakers “make useful things seem just to cities instead of pernicious ones” (c2–4)? For is Protagoras, here, not suggesting a distinction between what is ‘useful’ and what is ‘just’ and making only the latter relative to the city’s beliefs? Presumably,²¹ the key to avoiding this problem lies in the subsequent sentence, which is explicitly intended to be explanatory (cf. ἐπεὶ): “For whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is so for that city and for as long as it is held to be so” (c4–6). The point here, I take it, is not to mark out ‘the just’ as the content of the city’s beliefs in contrast with, for instance, ‘the useful’ or ‘the good’. After all, if this were so, the disappearance of any reference to ‘the just’ in the immediately following sentence would be very hard to make sense of. Rather, what the sentence seeks to explain, it seems, is what it is for a city to have things ‘seeming to it’. To have things ‘seeming to it’ is for a city to have beliefs about the just and admirable; it is the city’s particular mode of having beliefs. As Joseph Maguire puts it in a comparison with the example of education, “the only difference from the pupil is that the *phantasmata* of the state form a restricted class and have a name: ‘the just’” (1973, 128). This is also why, in a later reference back to this passage, Protagoras can unproblematically lump together all examples as instances of

21 For the following argument see also Maguire 1973, 128–129.

the same principle that “what seems to each person and each city also is for that person or city” (168b5–6). Once we read the explanatory sentence in this way, the preceding lines become much less problematic. When the speakers are said to “make useful things seem just to cities instead of pernicious ones”, we need not take that as suggesting that ‘the useful’ is not what ‘seems’ to the city. Rather, we can read it as saying that the city comes to think about the just in a way that seems more useful to it. It is presumably in an attempt to make this thought clearer that Protagoras goes on to indicate that the reference to ‘the just’ is not meant to introduce a new element into the equation (167c4–6) and to illustrate this by repeating the example again *without* reference to ‘the just’ (c6–7).

So much for the coherence of the defense speech.²² However, even if Protagoras’ argument in the speech does not display the ambiguity that is often attributed to it, we might of course still ask how it is supposed to work. After all, if he consistently makes the judgment that some appearance or belief is ‘better’ relative to the subject who has that appearance or belief, then his defense might seem somewhat inadequate to Socrates’ challenge: while the sophist would indeed stay true to the measure doctrine, he would have a hard time showing how the appearance or belief of an individual—that some state is better than another—would be able to accommodate the possibility of wisdom as something with a claim to general and interpersonal *authority*. The expert would only be an expert for whoever thinks he is an expert. Protagoras’ position, in other words, commits him to a conception of ‘better’ that seems to lead us right back to the original problem (stated in 161d–e, see above): how we can make sense of wisdom if everybody have access to their own truth—including the truth about what is better?

This leads us to the central question of Protagoras’ theory of wisdom and its relation to the measure doctrine. I want argue that it is in fact possible to construe the outlines of such a theory and that, once we do so, we can see the later self-refutation argument in a new, and more attractive, light. However, to be able to do this, we need to pay attention to some rarely discussed details in the speech and to interpret our findings in the light of our discussion of the *Protagoras* in the previous chapter. To begin, I want to draw attention to a couple of lines in the defense speech the importance of which has not often been noted. This is the latter part of the passage already cited above:

22 Zilioli (2007, 63) similarly reads Protagoras’ defense as consistently making beliefs about what is better relative to the holder of the belief. He does not, however, engage with the details of the defense in order to show how this is so.

Rather, I think, someone whose soul is in a pernicious state, and believes things akin to that condition, is made to have different beliefs due to a useful [χρηστῇ] state of the soul. These latter appearances some, from inexperience [ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας], call ‘true’; but my position is that they are ‘better’ than the others, though in no way more ‘true’.

Theaet. 167a6–b4

What is important about this passage is that Protagoras recognizes, however casually, that someone might disagree with him about the measure doctrine. This might seem trivial, but for someone with Protagoras’ views it is not. The interesting thing is how he explains *why* people might come to disagree with him. True to his measure doctrine Protagoras does not dismiss the view of his opponents as false or hold out his own as (objectively) true.²³ But this does not mean that he cannot explain why his position should be taken as the epistemically superior position. When people disagree with him, he says, they do so because of *inexperience* (ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας). As we will see, this somewhat casual remark will come back to haunt Protagoras later, but for now we should note how it helps us understand better the conception of wisdom presented in the defense speech. Protagoras suggests that a claim to wisdom (like his own) can be vindicated, not by an appeal to the truth of one’s beliefs, but to the process of experience that has given rise to it (though it is left unclear whose and what kind of experience he has in mind). A number of other observations further confirm this connection between wisdom and practical experience of some sort. Firstly, as we have already seen, repeatedly throughout the speech the improvement that wisdom is supposed to bring about is glossed in terms of what is “useful” (χρηστῇ, 167b2; c1; c3; c7). This lends a distinctly pragmatic flavour to the notion of improvement at work here: the ‘better’ state that wisdom brings about is ‘better’ relative to some practical context.²⁴ Secondly,

23 At first sight, his remark might seem to suggest that these people are *wrong* in calling the better beliefs “true”. But this can hardly be so given Protagoras’ view that all beliefs are true. As the contrast between “better” and “more true” indicates, what he is rejecting is rather the view that the distinction between better and worse beliefs is that between true and false ones. Cf. McDowell 1973, 168.

24 Note that Socrates himself clearly recognizes the central role played by the idea of usefulness in Protagoras’ defense of the measure doctrine. For in a second, separate argument against the sophist, following both the self-refutation argument and the extended digression in 172c–177b, he homes in precisely on this operative notion (although he prefers there to speak of the ‘beneficial’ rather the ‘useful’; 178a5–179b5). Beliefs concerning beneficiality, he points out, logically belong in the class of beliefs that make reference to the future

and pointing in the same direction, Protagoras' account of wisdom in the defense speech is conspicuously phrased in terms of results. The wise man—whether he is a doctor, a gardener, a sophistic teacher, or a speaker—is never presented as someone who is wise in virtue of what he thinks and believes. Rather, he is consistently presented as someone who *does* something, namely someone who *brings about* an improvement (ποίησις, 166d7; cf. 167a7; b2; c2; c4; c7; and μεταβάλλων, 166d6–7; cf. 167a2; a4; a5).²⁵ Though the details are left very vague, this insistence that wisdom be understood relative to actual results and usefulness dovetails nicely with the sentiment behind Protagoras' suggestion that it is experience that accounts for epistemic authority.²⁶

These observations fit well with the reading of the *Protagoras* presented in the previous chapter. In the *Protagoras* the eponymous sophist, prompted by Socrates' challenge, argued for a conception of expert authority along distinctively social pragmatist lines. What he offers to teach is really only a modest improvement to a common political *technē* that has arisen, like other crafts, as the result of mankind's experience with surviving in a hostile environment. On the model of a 'craftsman community', every member of society is taught the established "political craft", as far as possible, through the accumulated, and converging, influences of everyone else, from his parents and nurses to his teachers and the city at large. When Protagoras calls himself an expert, it is only because what he teaches is ultimately a refined version of this long-established

(178a5–10). However, in the case of such forward-looking beliefs, there turns out to be an independent fact of the matter that it is possible to disagree about, namely how something *will* appear to someone in the future. A patient and a doctor might hold opposite beliefs about whether the patient will feel warm the next day, but only one of them will hold a belief that corresponds to how the patient will actually feel at that time. By thus implying a form of objective standards for the truth of judgments, the notion of usefulness/beneficiality is thus shown to be problematic for the measure doctrine. On this so-called 'future argument': Burnyeat 1990, 39–42.

25 This emphasis on the centrality of 'doing', as opposed to 'knowing' or 'thinking', is one that Protagoras' conception of expertise shares with that found in the Hippocratic treatises: Cuomo 2007, 14.

26 'Pragmatist' readings of Protagoras' defense speech, like the one I propose here, were once widespread cf. e.g. Schiller 1908; Taylor 1926, 332–333. Cf. Rowett 2013, 196 n19. Burnyeat attempts to nip any reading of Protagoras' speech along these lines in the bud (1990, 24). However, the problems he raises for it seem to stem from his (Platonic) assumption that if change for the better is to explain epistemic authority, then the improvement in question must be "an objective matter", by which he means that it must involve reference to objective truth. Protagoras, as I will suggest, did not share this assumption—and Plato, unlike Burnyeat, took his denial of it seriously.

and recognized craft. Moreover, in the *Protagoras*, too, this conception of expert authority relies on an appeal to perceived *usefulness* (expressed by the term *χρηστός*). The common teaching, to which all members of society are subjected, aims at instilling in them the capacities and beliefs that have proven themselves “useful” from the perspective of communal life (cf. *χρήσιμοι*, *Prot.* 326b4; *χρηστῇ*, b7).²⁷ Protagoras even puts a further spin on the same idea, if on a smaller scale, to further bolster his own personal claim to epistemic authority. His professional claim—to be that rare person who can go slightly beyond the common ‘political expertise’ and improve upon it—is justified by the same standard of collective experience that made it a *technē* in the first place. After all, although his students are only asked to pay him what his teachings ‘seem’ to them to be worth, *he is still making a lot of money*. His claim to wisdom is vindicated by the common experience of usefulness that manifests itself in the continuous and systematic influx of *drachmae* from satisfied customers.

Although Protagoras’ account of wisdom in the *Theaetetus* is not spelled out to the same extent as in the *Protagoras*, we have seen that it does hint at the same underlying idea. Epistemic authority must be understood in terms of results and usefulness and is vindicated by reference to experience, rather than truth. Moreover, as we can now see, Protagoras’ choice of examples is significant. In his rejection of Socrates’ mocking suggestion that, on the measure doctrine, frogs would be wise (after all, their appearances are always true), Protagoras says:

Well, I’m far from calling the wise ‘frogs’, Socrates. On the contrary, where bodies are concerned, I call them ‘doctors’, and where plants are concerned, ‘gardeners’.

Theaet. 167b4–7

The wording is important here. In many translations, Protagoras is here presented, somewhat imprecisely, as saying that he calls doctors and gardeners (but not frogs) ‘wise’.²⁸ But what he literally says is that, in the fields of physical health and cultivation of the earth, he calls ‘the wise’ ‘doctors’ and ‘gardeners’

27 It is tempting to speculate, on the basis of these two dialogues, that the preference for this particular term, *χρηστός*, goes back to the historical Protagoras himself. It is striking that when Socrates later has to formulate a modified version of Protagoras’ defense speech in his own voice (*Theaet.* 171d9–172b8; 177c8–d5), he conspicuously drops the (Protagorean?) *χρηστός* and switches to the terms *συμφέρον* and *ὠφέλιμον*.

28 McDowell: “... where bodies are concerned, I say it’s the doctors who are the wise, and where plants are concerned, gardeners” (1973, 40).

respectively (whereas he would never call them ‘frogs’).²⁹ The difference is significant. What he says is not simply that, concerning (human) bodies, doctors are wise. Rather, he makes the more specific suggestion that, in the areas of bodies and plants, wisdom *comes in the form of* conventional arts, like medicine and husbandry. Concerning bodies, doctors are *the* wise. In other words, if we want to identify the wise in a given area, what we should do is to look to the established arts and expertises pertaining to that area, whose usefulness would be highly valued and widely recognized. In the *Protagoras* as we have seen, this is a familiar thought. Moreover, in light of the *Protagoras*, it is not surprising that Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* attempts to lump in his own characteristic specialities, education and public speaking, among those conventional arts. As we saw, it was because Protagoras’ own teaching could be seen as modeled after, and an extension of, the commonly shared ‘political expertise’ that he could claim it to be epistemically authoritative. By juxtaposing it with medicine and husbandry the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus*, too, hopes to frame his own professional practice as a similarly renowned and recognized art. He even invokes, almost as an afterthought, the characteristic principle of paying fees as the vindication of his wisdom: the sophistic teacher who puts his students in a better state is wise—“and worthy of a lot of money in the eyes of those who have been educated by him” (ἄξιος πολλῶν χρημάτων τοῖς παιδευθεῖσιν, 167d1–2). It is surely no coincidence that Protagoras, here, makes the sophist’s worthiness depend on the *view* (note the dative) of those who have *completed* their education (note the aorist).³⁰ It is their collective experience and recognition that vindicates his claim to wisdom.³¹

29 The Greek is: καὶ τοὺς σοφοὺς, ὧ φίλε Σώκρατες, πολλοὺ δέω βατράχους λέγειν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ μὲν σώματα ἰατροὺς λέγω, κατὰ δὲ φυτὰ γεωργοὺς. Cf. also the translation by Rowe (2005).

30 The chance of the aorist being significant is even greater if we take serious Diogenes Laertius’ claim that (the historical) Protagoras was “the first to determine the parts of time [in verbs]” (9.52 = DK 80 A1) and make the, not unreasonable, assumption that Plato knew about this.

31 This important nuance is captured in Cornford’s translation (1935), but not by that of Levett/Burnyeat (1990), who translate: “Similarly the professional teacher who is able to educate his pupils on these lines is a wise man, and he is worth his large fees to them”. McDowell (1973) does indeed render the aorist, but he does not appreciate the importance of the dative within the context of Protagoras’ theory and writes simply that the sophist “deserves a lot of money from those he has educated”.

Who is the Measure?

Importantly, on the theory of wisdom Protagoras hints at in the *Theaetetus* and spells out in more detail in the *Protagoras*, the measure doctrine itself, far from posing a challenge to the possibility of wisdom, can be seen as the principle on which Protagoras' very theory of wisdom is built. But we should note that the interpretation of the doctrine that makes this possible is very different from the one we find in the first part of Socrates' discussion of Protagoras (151d–162e). As I will argue, the difference between the two turns on the question: What is meant by saying that *man* is the measure of all things?

Socrates first introduces Protagoras and his measure doctrine in an attempt to explicate and clarify Theaetetus' proposed definition of knowledge as perception (151e–152a). This is achieved by appropriating Protagoras' central notion of 'appearing to someone' to the narrow case of 'being perceived by someone': if the wind feels cold to one individual but not to another, it *is* cold for the former, though not for the latter (152b–c). Socrates does indicate that he is fully aware that 'to appear', on Protagoras' doctrine, in fact encompasses both perception and believing (156b; 157d; 161e). But in this part of the dialogue he is satisfied with discussing it exclusively in terms of sense perception, since this is what allows him to make sense of Theaetetus' proposal: if the wind simply is for me as I perceive it to be, then perception becomes an infallible form of cognition, and thus could, perhaps, represent a form of knowledge.³² Now, the details of this phenomenalist position are not always easy to work out, and I will not attempt to do so here. But it is important for our purposes to spell out clearly what this early appropriation of the measure doctrine to the particular case of sense perception implies for Socrates' initial understanding of that doctrine itself.

I want to suggest that Socrates' early discussion of sense perception leads him to a 'minimal' or 'abstract' conception of 'man' in 'man is the measure'. What I mean is this. If our understanding of what it is 'to appear' is primarily modeled on what it is 'to be perceived', it is easy to come to assume that 'man' in 'man is the measure' is simply the subject taken as an abstract receiver of immediate and momentary impressions. After all, sense perception is typically something that is immediately given in this way. To put it in another way, when the case of sense perception is taken as the paradigmatic application of the measure doctrine, 'man' is naturally assumed to mean *no more than* the phenomenalist subject of certain appearances and beliefs at a certain time, in

32 Sedley 2004, 39.

exactly the same way as someone who perceives the wind as cold is simply the receiving subject of a perception that the wind is cold. We thus end up with a minimal or abstract conception of ‘man’ in the measure doctrine.³³ It is this abstract understanding that allows Socrates to poke fun at Protagoras later on:

I was astonished that he did not state at the beginning of the Truth that ‘Pig is the measure of all things’ or ‘Baboon’ or some yet more out-of-the-way creature with the power of perception. That would have made a most imposing and disdainful opening. It would have made it clear that, while we were standing astounded at his wisdom as though he were a god, he was in reality no better authority than a tadpole—let alone any other man.

Theaet. 161c3–d1; trans. LEVETT/BURNYEAT

It is clearly only under the assumption that the measure doctrine is to be modeled on the particular case of sense perception that Socrates’ tease gets any traction here. For if ‘man’ meant anything *more* than simply an abstract bearer of appearances and beliefs, it would be much less easy for Socrates to straightforwardly put human beings on a par with pigs, baboons, tadpoles or “some other creature that has perception, still more out of the way than those”. Only under the assumption that the bare possession of appearances and beliefs is the sole relevant characteristic of a Protagorean ‘man’ does the comic substitution work. Socrates, in other words, can only have his fun at Protagoras’ expense by assuming that there is really nothing distinctively *human* about his ‘man’.

Importantly, this abstract conception of the ‘man’ in the measure doctrine also has implications for *what* we imagine and expect to be declared ‘true’ according to that doctrine. After all, how some object appears to my visual sense apparatus depends on such utterly contingent factors as, say, where I happen to be spatially located, how well I slept last night, and what time of day it is. And the next time I look it might often, for one of these or a thousand other

33 It is important to make clear that this is *not* what Gail Fine has called ‘Narrow Protagoreanism’, which is the view that the measure doctrine is *restricted* to sense perception (Fine 2003, 134–135; cf. Sedley 2004, 50). As I mentioned, Socrates is aware throughout that the measure doctrine covers both sensory appearances and beliefs. The interpretation of the doctrine I am attributing to him in the early discussion is rather one on which what it is to be a ‘man’ is *modeled on*, or *understood in light of*, the particular case of sense perception. However, ‘Narrow Protagoreanism’ does make an appearance later on in the dialogue (179c).

reasons, appear different to me. Hence, the implication of understanding the measure doctrine on the model of sense perception is that it tends to introduce an element of arbitrariness into the measure doctrine: it comes to be assumed that if what is 'true' in a given case is simply whatever happens to 'appear' or 'seem' to some random person at some random time, then what will be 'true' in any given case will be something utterly arbitrary. The way this assumption comes out in Socrates' early discussion of the measure doctrine is through his fictional account of Protagoras' association with the "secret doctrine" of Heraclitean flux theory (152c–160e). On this theory, what appears to someone is simply the result of a particular and unique constellation of the movements that make up perceiver and perceived (153e–154a; 156a–157c), a constellation which will never occur again, since all perceivers are different and since both perceiver and perceived are in a process of continuous change (154a; 159e–160a). What makes plausible Socrates' attempt to associate this theory of permanent transformation and instability with Protagoras' position is the underlying assumption that the sophist's measure doctrine generally implies the same kind of arbitrariness we find in the particular case of sense perception.³⁴

However, once Protagoras gets the opportunity to defend and explain the measure doctrine, having rebuked Socrates for relying merely on "likelihood" (162e5–6) and for simply chasing after words (166c1–2; d7–e1), we see that he clearly does not share the assumptions that guided Socrates in the early discussion. On the contrary, his theory of wisdom assumes a distinctively *human* conception of 'man' in the measure doctrine.³⁵ The 'man' who is the measure, on Protagoras' view, is someone with the capacity, not just for perceiving and being the bearer of beliefs, but also for learning and judging. That is why what 'seems' to him can be informed by his experience of usefulness and improvement, not merely his immediate feelings or sense impressions. As Jaap Mansfeld has put this point, the 'man' who is a measure is not some "abstract anybody" whose belief "has come to him on the spur of the moment or is valid for him for the moment only" (Mansfeld 1981, 44–45). Rather, Mansfeld suggests, 'man' in the measure doctrine should be understood in the sense of a *person*, that is, someone "whose present state of mind and outlook are to a large extent the outcome

34 For the close link between the thesis that knowledge is perception and radical flux theory see Sedley 2004, 40–44. Notomi observes that there is "no independent evidence (outside the Platonic tradition) that [the historical] Protagoras bases his *homo mensura* thesis on the Heraclitean ontology" (2013, 22).

35 As Farrar points out, by comically suggesting the substitution of 'man' for 'pig' or 'baboon' Socrates in fact implicitly draws attention to the fact that, for Protagoras himself, there is something significant about the choice of *man* in particular (1988, 59).

of his personal history” and who “has been influenced to a large degree by what he has encountered in his environment, which above all means by other men [...], and who has been formed by his personal response to this ‘conditioning’” (46). In the defense speech, it is in the case of the city that this specifically Protagorean conception of the measuring subject is most clearly hinted at. What ‘seems’ to the city, Protagoras says, is what it “holds to be so” (νομίζει, 167c5), a verb whose derivation from *nomos* specifically suggests that the belief in question is arrived at over time and finds expression in the established norms and behaviour. This, clearly, is a far cry from the abstract conception of ‘man’ we found in the early discussion; whether on the individual or the social level, it now refers to something distinctively human.

Once we understand ‘man’ as it is used by Protagoras himself the assumption that the measure doctrine implies arbitrariness also becomes much less plausible. Consider the way the doctrine is applied in the case of the characteristic Protagorean principle of paying fees. Protagoras’ point, here, is that there is precisely nothing arbitrary about what ‘seems’ to each of his students after they have received their education from him. They all share the same belief because they have had the same experience: that his teachings are useful. The point can be generalized: given a shared experience and history persons (in the plural) might often, at least on some issues, largely come to agree with each other about the value or usefulness of something. Note that this is what makes it possible for Protagoras to speak as though the measure doctrine can also straightforwardly be applied to whole communities, as in the case of the city in 167c. A group of persons, while strictly speaking each his own measure, can by their shared experience and beliefs be thought of as a ‘common’ measure of how things are. Here, the discussion in *Theaetetus* clearly echoes that of the *Protagoras*, as interpreted in the previous chapter. Contrary to what Socrates initially assumes in both dialogues, popular opinion need not be characterized by diversity and arbitrariness. On some questions, at least, it rather displays a reasoned consensus around certain beliefs or patterns of behaviour. As we saw in the *Protagoras*, this conception of the realm of ordinary belief has clear political overtones. On the one hand, by making ‘being’ and ‘truth’ relative to individual human judgment, the measure doctrine aligns itself with democratic sentiments: it effectively blocks the possibility of grounding authority in an appeal to the objective nature of things, that is, to something that is by definition independent of what people judge and believe.³⁶ But, on the other

36 Cf. Socrates’ remark in 161e (cited in the previous chapter) that Protagoras is asserting his measure doctrine “with an eye to the demos [δημοῦμενον λέγειν]”.

hand, the implications of the measure doctrine's denial of objective truth are not those that Socrates attempts to associate with radical flux. For what 'seems' to people is not necessarily something completely unique and arbitrary in each case: it is 'conditioned' by life in a way that makes reasoned consensus possible.³⁷ Thus it is precisely because 'man'—in the sense of a person—is the measure that we can converge on our beliefs in the way required by Protagoras' defense. The measure doctrine, in other words, is constitutive of, rather than in tension with, Protagoras' theory of wisdom.

This shift from one conception of the measure doctrine to another in the course of the discussion leading up to the self-refutation argument is crucial for our purposes. As I mentioned above, given their reading of 169d–170a, most commentators have assumed that the target of the self-refutation argument is the measure doctrine as it was discussed prior to Protagoras' defense speech. But we can now see why this would result in a misguided approach to that argument. For in his speech the sophist has provided an alternative interpretation of the doctrine, and it is the measure doctrine *as it was explained and defended in that speech* that is the target in the subsequent argument (as I argued above).³⁸ Was it right or not for Protagoras to argue for the compatibility of measure doctrine and wisdom in the way he just did? Or did it leave his position somehow vulnerable? Socrates' self-refutation argument will suggest that it did.

37 "Subjective truth is indeed what Protagoras is concerned with, but this does not entail that intersubjective truth is impossible. Whenever a plurality of persons agree, a common measure has arisen. This intersubjective truth is not independent of those who have agreed to it; it is only valid for them, i.e. only exists, as long as it is accepted" (Mansfeld 1981, 47–48). For 'intersubjectivity' as a political ideal in the historical Protagoras see Schiappa 2003, 185. On the political implications of associating Protagoras with Heraclitean flux theory see further Macé 2013, 212; Sørensen 2016.

38 A difficulty for this conclusion may seem to arise from a remark made by Socrates immediately after he has completed the self-refutation argument. "When he concedes that the person who contradicts him judges what is true, then Protagoras himself will concede that neither a dog nor the man in the street is the measure about anything that he hasn't been taught" (171b12–c2). Why does Socrates bring up the notion of animals as measures at this late point, if Protagoras has already blocked that line of interpretation? The answer is presumably that the remark is meant as a summary that connects the result of the self-refutation argument, just reached, with the previous criticism. Socrates' point, then, would be that regardless of how we construe 'man' in the measure—whether abstractly (as any perceiving being, including dogs) or as distinctly human (as attempted by Protagoras in the defense speech)—Protagoras will be forced to reject it. Thanks to David Sedley for pointing out to me this potential problem.

The Self-Refutation Argument (170a3–171c7)

Let us return now to consider the self-refutation argument again in light of the above considerations. As I said at the beginning, on the usual construal of the argument it seems to display a conspicuous ‘gap’ in the reasoning. For even as Protagoras agrees that his measure doctrine is false *for someone* it is not clear why he must for that reason also agree that it is false *for him*. The way this problem was thought to manifest itself, as we saw, is in the striking disappearance of the crucial qualifier (‘for x’) in the course of the argument: having admitted that some people reject his measure doctrine and that this belief is true ‘for them’, Protagoras, it seems, is suddenly made to infer from this that those who disagree with him believe what is true *simpliciter* (171a6–b7). Once this is established, the qualifiers discreetly return as Socrates goes on to conclude that the measure doctrine has now turned out to be true ‘for no one’ (b10–c7). But it is difficult to see what could justify the crucial dropping of the qualifiers in 171a–b that allows for this conclusion.

Given the discussion above I believe we are now in a position to formulate a reading of Socrates’ self-refutation argument that avoids this problem. But to see how this is so we need to look closer at a couple of passages whose importance to that argument has rarely been appreciated. To begin, let me point out that the apparent dropping of the qualifiers is in fact immediately preceded by a short stretch of text (171a2–3) that rarely shows up in the reconstructions of Socrates’ argument. It occurs just as Socrates is about to turn the tables on Protagoras:

[ΣΩ.] Τί δὲ αὐτῷ Πρωταγόρα; ἄρ’ οὐχὶ ἀνάγκη, εἰ μὲν μὴδὲ αὐτὸς ᾤετο μέτρον εἶναι ἄνθρωπον μὴδὲ οἱ πολλοί, ὥσπερ οὐδὲ οἴονται, μὴδενὶ δὴ εἶναι ταύτην τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἣν ἐκεῖνος ἔγραψεν; εἰ δὲ αὐτὸς μὲν ᾤετο, τὸ δὲ πλῆθος μὴ συνοίεται, οἴσθ’ ὅτι πρῶτον μὲν ὅσῳ πλείους οἷς μὴ δοκεῖ ἢ οἷς δοκεῖ, τοσοῦτῳ μᾶλλον οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ ἔστιν.

[ΘΕΟ.] Ἀνάγκη, εἴπερ γε καθ’ ἐκάστην δόξαν ἔσται καὶ οὐκ ἔσται.

[ΣΩ.] Ἐπειτά γε τοῦτ’ ἔχει κομψότατον· ἐκεῖνος μὲν περὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ οἰήσεως τὴν τῶν ἀντιδοξαζόντων οἴησιν, ἣ ἐκείνον ἡγοῦνται ψεύδεσθαι, συγχωρεῖ που ἀληθῆ εἶναι ὁμολογῶν τὰ ὄντα δοξάζειν ἅπαντας.

Socrates: And what about for Protagoras himself? Must he not say this, that supposing he himself did not believe that man is the measure, any more than the many (who indeed do not believe it), then this would be true for no one? On the other hand, suppose he believed it himself, but the mass of men do not agree with him; **then you**

see, first, that the more those to whom it does not seem to be outnumber those to whom it does, so much more it isn't than it is?
 Theodorus: That must be so, if it is going to be or not according to each belief.

Socrates: And thereafter it has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras concedes, I suppose, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing that he agrees that everyone judges what is.

Theaet. 170e7–171a9; trans. LEVETT/BURNYEAT, modified

The passage cited here has traditionally been read in a way that serves to marginalize the lines in 171a2–3 (in bold typeface). The reason for this is that it is commonly assumed that, in the cited passage, Socrates is making *two* distinct arguments against Protagoras on the basis of the assumption that “the mass” (τὸ πλῆθος) disagrees with him about the measure doctrine. A first argument, so it is assumed, is the one given in 171a2–3 and introduced with “first” (πρῶτον). This ‘first’ argument is then followed by the actual self-refutation argument, as a separate argument, beginning in a6 (introduced with εἰταί).³⁹ But whereas a lot of thought has gone into understanding the (assumed) ‘second’ argument, commentators have not paid much attention to the ‘first’, and those who have have not found it to be very good. As McDowell argues:

[The first argument] is clearly incidental. Its derivation is suspect. For, though Protagoras can reasonably be credited with the thesis that it depends on each individual judgement whether any proposition is the truth or not (cf. 171a4–5), this must be taken to mean that it depends on any given person's judgment whether any proposition is true *for him* or not; not that every person's judgment must be given weight in deciding, by a count of heads, to what extent any proposition is true *simpliciter*.

MCDOWELL 1973, 170

These considerations have thus led readers to downplay the lines in 171a2–3 as both irrelevant to Socrates' supposed main argument (“the exquisite feature”) and not very persuasive in their own right.⁴⁰ Against this view, I will suggest that they are not only relevant but in fact provide the key to making the self-refutation argument itself work.

39 McDowell 1973, 170; Burnyeat 1976b, 177; Sedley 2004, 59; Castagnoli 2010, 50–51.

40 Cf. also Burnyeat 1976b, 182–183.

Let us take on the different elements of the traditional reading in turn. In response to the assumption that Socrates is making two distinct arguments I simply wish, at this point, to point out that that reading is not in fact required by the text itself. For although the sequence *πρῶτον—ἔπειτα* can indeed point to a division into two independent points (something like “firstly”-“secondly”), it need not do so. In particular, we can also understand the word pair as governing an argumentative sequence. The idea here is not so much that the word pair itself has an inferential force (something like “first”—“therefore”),⁴¹ but rather that it pedagogically breaks up an argument into what is made to look like a temporal sequence. Theodorus is “first” (*πρῶτον*) made to see that something is the case, and can only “thereafter” (*ἔπειτα*) be made to appreciate how this has certain significant implications. On this latter understanding of the *πρῶτον—ἔπειτα* sequence, understanding “the exquisite feature” of the argument (introduced with *ἔπειτα*) would in some way depend on having understood the point made in the lines introduced with “first”. The Stranger is leading Theodorus through *one single argument* with several steps, rather than distinguishing between two separate and free-standing arguments. I return to this possibility below.

As to the negative appraisal of the point made in what is taken to be Socrates’ first argument (171a2–3), our discussion above has, I think, given us the tools to construe it in a way that both makes better sense and allows a new attractive reading of the self-refutation argument as a whole. Note the opening lines of the passage cited above. Socrates’ question is: what will be the case *for Protagoras himself* (*αὐτῷ Πρωταγόρῳ*, 170e7). Given the topic under discussion (the measure doctrine) the dative is surely not casual here, and that has important implications for the discussion that follows. For it suggests that the qualifiers that are missing in the subsequent lines are to be supplied from this opening question. Thus, when the measure doctrine is said to be “so much more not being than being” (171a3), and its denial is said to be “true” (a8), both of these points should be qualified with a “for Protagoras”. There is, in other words, no sudden dropping of the qualifiers in the course of the argument. The discussion from 170e7 onwards is concerned with finding out what will or must be true *for Protagoras himself*, given the assumed disagreement over his measure doctrine.⁴²

41 Although LSJ s.v. *ἔπειτα* (11) suggests that this might also be a possible reading.

42 It is important to distinguish this point from the one made by Sedley (2004, 60). What I suggest is not that we imagine the *entire* subsequent argument as taking place inside Protagoras’ own ‘private world’, which strikes me as simply demanding too much of the dative in 170e7. What I am suggesting is the much less demanding (and, I think, more

But this alone, of course, does not solve the problem. For *why* would such disagreement make the denial of the measure doctrine true for Protagoras? Could he not just stubbornly maintain that the doctrine is true for him, regardless of what the case might be for others? If the Protagorean position under discussion were the measure doctrine without its elaboration in the defense speech, he could indeed, it seems, do just that. But this is where it becomes crucial to bear in mind that the position under consideration is the measure doctrine as it was defended by Protagoras in his defense speech. In that speech, as we saw, Protagoras proposed that the measure doctrine should be understood within the framework of a theory that makes intersubjective experience of usefulness, rather than truth, constitutive of wisdom. Moreover, the model for this conception of epistemic authority was the traditional human crafts and arts whose usefulness and benefits are widely recognized. A trained doctor is wiser than others regarding the body, not because he has true beliefs, but because it has generally come to be believed that the particular views about the body he represents can help us get better.

It is the measure doctrine as defended within the framework of this theory of wisdom that is the target of Socrates' self-refutation argument. This is why, as a first step leading up to that argument, Socrates picks up on Protagoras' 'craft' model of wisdom, but then adds an important point.

Socrates: Well, then Protagoras, we too are expressing the beliefs of a man—all men [πάντων ἀνθρώπων δόξας]—when we say that there is no one in the world who doesn't believe that in some matters he is wiser than other men; while in other matters, they are wiser than he. In times of danger, in particular, you see this belief. When they are in distress, on the battlefield, or in sickness or in a storm at sea, all men turn to the authorities in each sphere as to the gods, and look to them for salvation because they are superior in precisely this one thing—knowledge [τῷ εἰδέναι]. And wherever human life and work goes on, you find everywhere men seeking teachers and authorities, for themselves and for other living creatures and for the direction of all human works. You find also men who believe that they are able to teach and take the lead. In all these cases, what else can we say but

natural) reading on which what is relativized by the dative is merely the conclusions in reached in 171a2–3 and a8. This suggestion is thus only preparatory: it is meant to explain the lack of qualifiers in those places, not to make the argument as a whole work (yet).

that men do believe in the existence of both wisdom and ignorance among themselves?

Theodorus: There can be no other conclusion.

Socrates: And they believe that wisdom is true reasoning [ἀληθῆ διάνοιαν]? While ignorance is a matter of false judgment [ψευδῆ δόξαν]?

Theodorus: Yes, of course.

Theaet. 170a3–b10; trans. LEVETT/BURNYEAT, modified

Socrates begins the passage by going along with Protagoras' examples of traditional crafts and arts as instances of wisdom that are commonly recognized as useful. It is "the belief of all men" (πάντων ἀνθρώπων δόξας) that generals, doctors, and steersmen are of immense use and benefit in times of danger, and that these persons are wiser than others in their respective fields. So far Protagoras would agree. But Socrates goes on to make an additional twist that will turn out to be highly problematic for the sophist. For whereas Protagoras would argue that the widely perceived usefulness of these recognized experts is what establishes them as wise, Socrates points out that that is not how people generally think about it, whether they are themselves experts or non-experts. Firstly, unlike Protagoras, who insistently put the emphasis on results, people generally take a more intellectualist approach and understand wisdom to be first and foremost a matter of having some particular "knowledge" (τῷ εἰδέναι). And not only that. As Socrates goes on to point out, it is part of "the beliefs of all men" that the wisdom of these experts must be understood in terms of their having "true reasoning" (ἀληθῆ διάνοιαν), just as ignorance consists in having "false belief" (ψευδῆ δόξαν). Importantly, the situation the sophist thus finds himself in is one of being completely at odds with everybody else on the question of wisdom and truth. In his defense speech, as we saw, Protagoras, somewhat nonchalantly, dismissed potential disagreement with his theory as a result of inexperience (ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας, 167b2–4). But Socrates now presses him on this point. After all, it is not just "some people" (cf. τινες, 167b2) who might disagree with the sophist. *Everybody* disagrees with him, and they do so based on the exact same experience that has, according to Protagoras himself, led them to agree on certain activities and beliefs as useful. Whereas people's long and shared experience with the dangers of disease, both as patients and as doctors, has generally led them to accept established medical views of the body, it has not led them to adopt Protagoras' specific view that the doctor's expert authority is a matter of such a process of collective experience of usefulness, rather than a matter of truth. On this issue, Protagoras stands alone.

This, I suggest, is the key to understanding the structure of the self-refutation argument (170e7–171a9). Consider again the part introduced with “first” (a1–3). I argued above that we should take this as a point about what is the case ‘for Protagoras’. But why would opposition from “the many” (οἱ πολλοί) or “the mass of people” (τὸ πλῆθος) make it the case *for Protagoras* that “the more those to whom it does not seem to be the truth outnumber those to whom it does, so much more it isn’t than it is”? The answer, we can now see, is that his conception of epistemic authority has this implication for him. If wisdom is a matter of what has been established as the result of collective experience, then to the extent to which a given set of activities or beliefs have been thus established, those activities and beliefs should be treated as an instance of wisdom, that is, as having some epistemic authority. Protagoras, as Theodorus later puts it, is committed to taking “the beliefs of the rest” as “authoritative” (κυρίας, 179b7–8). This is what allows Socrates to turn the tables on him. For in the second part of the argument (171a6–b2), I suggest, rather than making a new independent point, Socrates simply draws the consequence of Protagoras’ commitment to this ‘democratic’ conception of wisdom (taking the πρῶτον—ἔπειτα sequence as argumentative, rather than as implying a division into independent points). People have long experience with experts and wisdom, but that has *not* led them to adopt a Protagorean view of these matters—quite the contrary. In the face of massive opposition from “the many”, the sophist must thus “concede as true” (for him) the conception of wisdom as true belief, which amounts to a denial of the measure doctrine itself. Given his egalitarian principle that “everyone judges what is” (τὰ ὄντα δοξάζειν ἅπαντας) he has no way of letting his own personal view count as authoritative and overrule the established view, and he is thus forced to deny that very principle. His conception of epistemic authority fails to qualify as epistemically authoritative on the terms it itself sets out. The only way out for Protagoras would be to deny that people disagree with him about the measure doctrine, but Socrates and Theodorus have already agreed that this would be extremely implausible (170c6–9). So Socrates can triumphantly conclude that since it is “disputed by everyone, Protagoras’ *Truth* would not be true for anyone at all, not even for himself” (171c5–7). The tables have successfully been turned on the late sophist. He is reduced, in Socrates comic image, to “stick his head up from below”, express his dissatisfaction with the whole thing, and “run off again” (171d1–3).

The interpretation of the self-refutation argument defended here has the great advantage that it avoids ascribing to Socrates the fallacious reasoning that has puzzled so many readers of the dialogue. When the measure doctrine is understood in light of Protagoras’ defense speech, Socrates can legitimately get from ‘the measure doctrine is false for everybody else’ to ‘the measure doctrine

is false for Protagoras' and bridge the problematic gap with which we began. This reading also has the additional virtue of bringing Plato into dialogue with a contemporary debate that is still very much alive. Socrates' argument, as I have interpreted it, is an early version, possibly the first, of what has become a classic strategy against pragmatist theories of enquiry and knowledge. As Bernard Williams puts it in a succinct summary of Hilary Putnam's criticism of Richard Rorty:

[Rorty's views] simply tear themselves apart. If, as Rorty is fond of putting it, the correct description of the world (for us) is a matter of what we find it convenient to say, and if, as Rorty admits, we find it convenient to say that science discovers a world that is already there, there is simply no perspective from which Rorty can say, as he does, that science does not really discover a world that is already there, but (more or less) invents it.

WILLIAMS 2014, 322; cf. WILLIAMS 1983

Of course, Protagoras speaks of 'usefulness' rather than 'convenience', and unlike many modern pragmatists he does not want to simply equate truth/correctness with usefulness/convenience, preferring to treat expert authority and wisdom as separate from questions of truth and falsehood.⁴³ But he makes himself vulnerable to the same charge: if the notion of objectively true belief is how people have generally found it useful to think about expert authority, in the same way that they have come to find (say) certain medical beliefs and practices useful, what gives Protagoras the authority to tell them to think in a fundamentally different way about this? The political implications of this argument are not spelled out by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, but it is not difficult to do so on his behalf. What he shows is that the notion of expert authority is incompatible with making a measure out of "the man in the street" (τὸν ἐπιτυχόντα ἄνθρωπον, 171c2). For ordinary men themselves do *not* share the view of authority and truth that, according to Protagoras, would make such reconciliation possible. A democratic conception of expert authority is, in a word, self-defeating.

43 Cf. Taylor 1926, 333.

Epilogue

The question of democracy's epistemic potential was a question Plato took seriously. In this book I have attempted to trace and reconstruct the various discussions in which he deals with that question, and I hope to have shown that his treatment of it, while critical, is guided by the conviction that there is a real issue here, an issue that cannot simply be ignored. A point of continuity in the discussions we have been looking at is the notion of collective experience and the question of its epistemic status. Whereas in the *Gorgias* this notion is introduced merely to negatively mark off democracy's epistemic foundations from those of truly scientific politics, the *Statesman* develops it into a conservative vision of a law-abiding democracy as belonging among the "better imitations" of ideal rule (if nothing more). In both of these dialogues, democracy's claim to epistemic justification is rejected by contrasting it with truly scientific political rule based on *truth* (either the truth concerning natures and causes, or the truth about what is appropriate under particular circumstances). But when Protagoras enters the stage, things get more complicated. Protagoras claims that there *is* no objective truth and that expert authority must be understood relative to people's practical experience of usefulness. In the *Protagoras*, this social pragmatism serves as the basis for an epistemic defense of democratic decision-making: what is established as authoritative in the social and political realm is a form of *technē* that everyone must share in if communal life is to be possible. In both the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*, Plato attempts to undermine the conception of *technē* on which this defense of epistemic democracy rests. The former dialogue challenges Protagoras' vision of democratic society as all too optimistic and insists that the sophist must accept a distinctively Socratic conception of *technē* if he wants to maintain a dominant role for reason and knowledge in human affairs. The *Theaetetus* is subtler. If my reconstruction of the self-refutation argument is correct, what Socrates does there is to show how Protagoras' pragmatist theory conspicuously falls short of the standards for epistemic authority it itself sets up. What happens to Protagoras' position if people have generally *not* found it useful to think of epistemic authority in terms of usefulness rather than true belief?

Now, reflections on democracy's epistemic competence in antiquity did not end with Plato, but they took a different turn. In the third book of his *Politics* Aristotle raises the question "who ought to hold ultimate political authority [τὸ κύριον] in the *polis*? Is it the multitude [τὸ πλῆθος], the wealthy, the good, the one best man, or a tyrant?" (*Pol.* 1281a11–13). The answer eventually turns out to be 'none of the above'. It is the laws of a good constitution, rather than any

single element of the population, that should be vested with political authority (1282b1–14). But before reaching that conclusion Aristotle devotes several pages to considering the multitude's claim to that position. In particular, he considers a scenario on which the rule of the *dēmos* comes out superior to others on explicitly epistemic grounds:

For the many, of whom each is not a good man, when they meet together may be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively, just as a feast to which many contribute is better than a dinner provided out of a single purse. For each individual among the many has a share of excellence and practical wisdom, and when they meet together, just as they become like one man, who has many feet, and hands, and senses, so too with regard to their character and thinking. Hence the many are better judges than a single man of music and poetry; for some understand one part, and some another, and among them they understand the whole.

Arist. *Pol.* 1281a42–b10; trans. JOWETT in BARNES 1995, slightly modified

The approach to the question of democracy's epistemic competence contained in this argument is fundamentally different from the one we have found in the dialogues of Plato we have considered. Their individual differences notwithstanding, those dialogues all assumed, with Socrates, that an epistemic justification of democracy would have to consist in showing that popular rule can be understood as a rule by *technē*, in particular. But the *technē* ideal of political knowledge is, of course, not itself neutral on the question of what the required epistemic competence should look like. A *technē*, after all, is normally something possessed and practiced by a single individual. So, if democratic rule is to be defended against the Socratic argument, the character of its decision-making must, somehow, be shown to approximate or conform to that of one person, the expert. This is why Plato's discussions all turned on portraying democracy's collective understanding as characterized by convergence of some kind, convergence around the ancestral laws or around a particularly useful way of dealing with the world and with each other. Only by speaking in one voice can the *dēmos* potentially come to resemble an individual expert.

By contrast, Aristotle presents a defense of democracy as epistemically justified by appealing to precisely those features of popular rule that makes it different from rule by a single person. The epistemic potential of democracy, he argues, lies in the fact that it is characterized by variety and diversity. Aristotle brings out this point by means of the metaphor of the potluck dinner. Just as a feast to which every guest contributes something may be superior

to one that is provided at the expense of one single person, so democratic deliberation may, under certain conditions, benefit from the fact that many different opinions, judgments, and points of view are brought to bear on the discussion. As the example of artistic appreciation suggests, the idea seems to be that the many partial judgments and diverse perspectives can add up to a more comprehensive assessment of the question than even the most discerning, single-perspective judgment of an expert.¹ Aristotle does say that the deliberating body will become “like one man” (ὥσπερ ἓνα ἄνθρωπον). But this is clearly not meant to suggest that it comes to resemble an actual individual expert. After all, as Aristotle goes on to point out, this assembled ‘man’, unlike real individuals, has multiple sets of feet, hands, and senses. Rather, the many people become “like one man” in that they become a single deliberating body. But it is a ‘man’ who is more epistemically competent than any individual, even an expert, could ever be.

It is not surprising that contemporary democratic theorists have found the Aristotelian approach more attractive than Plato’s.² Partly its appeal should be understood, I think, against the backdrop of the ever-increasing specialization of scientific disciplines that has occurred since the fourth century BC, especially perhaps in the last two centuries. The suggestion that we might understand democratic epistemic competence on the model of a specialized expertise or science, a *technē*, arguably seems even less plausible today than it did in Plato’s time, where the line between expert and layman was often not as clear-cut. If we want to formulate a defense of democracy along epistemic lines today, modern scholars have reasonably assumed, we must abandon the notion of *technē* as our exclusive model for conceptualizing political knowledge. However, another strong reason for the contemporary preference for Aristotle’s line of argument is surely to be found in the way it appeals to modern liberal sentiments and their celebration of democracy as a place of plurality and diversity. If independent liberal values like pluralism and diversity can be harnessed in the service of blocking the ‘epistocratic’ challenge to democracy (to use David Estlund’s neologism),³ then so much the better. What makes democracy morally and aesthetically attractive, so modern theorists hope to show, is

1 In my reading of Aristotle’s argument I follow Waldron (1995, 564), Ober (1998, 319–320; 2008, 110–111) and Schofield (2011, 294–296). Such ‘epistemic’ readings have recently been subjected to criticism, e.g. Lane 2013.

2 Estlund 2008, 232; Landemore 2013, 2; 59–64; Anderson 2006. But note that Anderson finds the source of democracy’s epistemic competence in a combination of diversity and “an experimental attitude towards social arrangements” *à la* Dewey (13).

3 Estlund 2008, 29 (with note).

also what makes it epistemically attractive, namely that we do *not* all converge around certain beliefs or ways of doing things.⁴

While it would certainly be wrong to characterize Plato as champion of pluralism and diversity, it is interesting to note that he was not blind to the kind of considerations that fueled the Aristotelian argument. In the late dialogue the *Laws*, a version of the same idea seems to lie behind the Athenian Stranger's positive portrayal, in book 3, of Persia under the reign of Cyrus (*Laws* 694a3–b6).⁵ The passage is interesting both as what seems to be a thinly veiled allusion to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* as well as a playful recasting of recurring themes in contemporary Greek political discourse.⁶ But whatever we take the exact underlying agenda to be, the ideas contained in the Persian account are remarkable in a Platonic context. What is striking about the story of Cyrus is what it points to as the *source* of the wisdom that characterized his political rule. The account of Cyrean Persia is presented as the historical, or ostensibly historical, confirmation of a general principle the Stranger has just articulated: that the three important properties of a good city—freedom (ἐλευθερία), friendship (φιλία), and wisdom (φρόνησις)—can only be obtained through the right mixture of monarchical despotism and democratic freedom (693d2–e1; cf. b3–5). Prominent among the democratic elements in Cyrus' rule was the practice of *parrhēsia*, free speech (694b3), and it is precisely this practice the Stranger uses to account for the system's epistemic competence.⁷ By giving everybody the opportunity to publicly voice his opinion and thus contribute to the deliberative process, Cyrus was able to harness “the collective power of thinking” (κοινὴν τὴν τοῦ φρονεῖν ... δύνανται, b4–5) for the benefit of the Persian Empire. The people's “joint share in intelligence” (νοῦ κοινωνίαν, b6) was made available to Cyrus through his promotion of the democratic freedom of all to participate in deliberation by offering advice.⁸ Unlike Aristotle, the Stranger does not explicitly

4 E.g. Landemore 2013, who makes the ‘cognitive diversity’ of democratic society the central pillar of her case for the epistemic superiority of democracy. Cf. Ober 2008, who argues that it was this ‘dispersed knowledge’ that gave historical Athens an edge *vis-à-vis* other poleis in the classical era and that our modern democracy “might again become [...] such a system” (2).

5 Remarking on the many similarities in outlook between Plato in *Laws* and Aristotle in *Ethics* and *Politics* Schofield adds: “Whether this is because both reflect discussion in the Academy in the 350s, or because the *Laws* shaped much of Aristotle's thinking in his early maturity, or because Plato in the *Laws* was learning from the young Aristotle, or because of a combination of two or more of these options, is unfortunately something we are never likely to know” (2013, 285n5).

6 Cf. Schöpsdau 1994, 456–468; Schofield 2013, 290–293; also Farrar 2013.

7 As noted, if not really discussed, by Schöpsdau (1994, 457).

8 To be sure, there is no mention in the passage of democratic institutions, like assemblies or

point to diversity as the operational principle behind this claim to epistemic competence. But his suggestion that wise government can be premised on a principled expectation that “someone” (τις, b2) among the people will have an intelligent opinion or perspective to offer “on some issue” (εἷς τι, b4) strongly points in this direction. As in the case of the Aristotelian potluck dinner, the idea seems to be that the diverse knowledge and individual experiences of the populace can function as an important epistemic resource.

However, while finding some merit in the Aristotelian line of argument, the Stranger’s Persian story also implies a rejection of that argument understood as an argument in favor of genuine democratic rule. After all, the story is explicitly introduced as historical evidence of the principle that wise government, like that of Cyrus, is the outcome of the right mixture of democracy *and monarchy*. Thus whereas the function of Aristotle’s potluck argument was to assess the *dēmos*’ claim to be “the ultimate political authority” (τὸ κύριον, *Pol.* 1281a11), in the Persian story of *Laws* 3 the ‘democratic’ potluck dinner is conducted under the undisputed authority of the Persian king, himself conveniently named Cyrus (Κῦρος). It is Cyrus who selects and “honors” (τιμῶντος) those of his subjects who happen to have useful advice on some issue (694b4).⁹

popular councils, and so we might wonder if the Stranger has something more limited in mind, like, say, the opportunity for free speech within a closed group of court advisers (cf. Schöpsdau 1994, 461). But several considerations speak against this. (1) It is not suggested that the pool of people from whom Cyrus accepts advice is in any way limited. On the contrary, in the context he seems to be speaking of *all* his subjects, both the original Persians and those new subject peoples who have been “put on the same footing” (ἐπὶ τὸ ἴσον ἄγοντες, 694a6–7; recalling Athenian *isēgoria*). (2) The *parrhēsia* in question is one that is exercised “in public” (εἰς τὸ μέσον, b5), which suggests that the Stranger is making a point about a form of ‘freedom’ that is enjoyed by the entire population. (3) In accordance with the general drift of this part of book 3, the Stranger is trying to make a point about the kind of principles that should regulate the political community *at large*, not merely the ruling class itself.

- 9 In accordance with conventional Greek usage, “honors”, here, presumably refers to some form of political office. Interestingly, the account of Cyrus can thus be seen as part of a fourth century debate over the nature of democratic ‘sovereignty’. As Melissa Lane has recently pointed out, the emergence of popular rule in Greece had “left a theoretical question unanswered: what was, or should, be the relation of the *plēthos*-dominated or popular *dēmos* to the offices (*archai*) that had historically been understood to be identified with ruling (*archein*)?” (Lane 2016, 54). She argues that the solution was sought, by Aristotle and others, in a conception of popular sovereignty as the people’s control of office-holders by means of election and accountability. On my reading, the account of Cyrus in *Laws* 3 plays an interesting part in this story. Cyrus, though a king and thus κύριος in the traditional, monarchical sense, is described by the Stranger as exercising his sovereignty primarily by electing office-holders (just as the Athenian *dēmos* did).

But note that, on the Stranger's account, this is not so much a matter of Cyrus *himself* being wise and bringing his own personal wisdom to bear on political deliberation. In the entire account of ancient Persia, Cyrus is nowhere described in positive epistemic terms, as someone with any particular knowledge or insight.¹⁰ (In fact, what led to the empire's decline under the reign of his son was precisely Cyrus' *ignorance* of the important principles of proper education: 694c6; 695a1–2.) Rather, the virtues of Cyrus are simply those of self-sacrifice in the common interest and a firm dedication to the community: he is “devoted to his country” (φιλόπολιν, 694c6),¹¹ and, as a general, he inspires loyalty by sharing with the ordinary soldiers the rough life on campaign (a7–b1; c6; 695a4–5). Tellingly, his qualities are compared to those of a shepherd, in particular. Cyrus was the product of the traditional Persian form of upbringing, and “the Persians being shepherds, this upbringing was a tough one, capable of producing hardy shepherds who could camp out and keep awake on watch and turn soldiers if necessary” (695a2–5). This is not the first time the reader of *Laws* 3 has encountered the notion of ‘shepherd virtue’. In the earlier account of pre-historical times, the Stranger described how only some scattered “hill-shepherds” would survive the floods that from time to time wipe out human civilization (677a1–b3). Unexposed to technology and culture, they would be “more unskilled and uneducated” (ἀτεχνότεροι μὲν καὶ ἀμαθέστεροι, 679d4) than people today and without knowledge of the “discoveries” that would later be made in “the political *technē* and other fields” (677c4–6). They would, however, also be uncorrupted by greed, internal strife and the other vices that follow in the wake of sophisticated culture and political life (679d4–e2), embodying rather an honest and high-minded naïveté (εὐήθειαν, c3) that led them to live a life of firm and unquestioning commitment to traditional communal values (c4–8; 680a5–6).

Aristotle's potluck argument in favor of democratic authority rested on two assumptions: (1) that the diversity found in democratic deliberation is an important epistemic resource, and (2) that democracy itself has the capacity for exploiting this resource for the sake of the common good. While agreeing with (1), the Stranger's story of Persia under Cyrus poses a challenge to (2).

10 Pace Schofield, who describes Cyrean Persia as a political system where “members of the political community could freely and of their own choice contribute to society under the guidance of a *wise king*” (2013, 296; my emphasis).

11 One might be tempted by Athenaeus' suggestion of φιλόπονον here. After all, Cyrus' empire was not a *polis*, and the notion of him as “hard-working” would fit well with his shepherd-like upbringing. But see Schöpsdau 1994, 466. Both readings are compatible with my argument.

Underlying the disagreement, it seems, are two divergent views of the character of democratic politics. In the *Politics* Aristotle makes it a condition for the potluck argument that the *dēmos* is of a certain moral quality: the people should be motivated by a sincere concern for the common good, not be a “hopelessly slavish bunch” (1282a15–16; cf. 1281b15–21) driven by narrow and class-specific self-interest.¹² When this condition is met (and Aristotle seems to assume that it can be met),¹³ democratic politics becomes an exercise in mutual cooperation, as when a group of potluck guests are motivated by the shared aim of creating the best dinner. Their individual contributions are all sincere attempts to further the common good. But the Stranger’s insistence on the need for Cyrus challenges this vision of democratic politics as overly optimistic. While duly recognizing the epistemic resource contained in the practice of *parrhēsia*, he denies that democracy can *itself* be relied on to harness that resource with a view to the common good. After all, as the Stranger makes clear in his later portrayal of Athens (700d–701c), democratic politics is rarely like the disciplined cooperative enterprise imagined in Aristotle’s argument. Other concerns often dominate the decision-making process, not least people’s unruly desire for narrow personal gratification at the expense of the common good. So while there is indeed an epistemic aspect to democracy, it needs to be detached from the brute reality of democratic *politics* if it is to be useful. The story of Cyrus in *Laws* 3 is an attempt to show how the epistemic resources of democracy can be safely utilized by a non-democratic regime that is firmly and independently committed to furthering the common good. While Plato’s approach to the question of democracy’s epistemic potential had shifted and his attitude had perhaps even further softened since the *Statesman*, the political conclusion remained the same to the end.

12 Schofield 2011, 294; Waldron 1995, 574–575.

13 This seems to be implied in 1281b20–21 and 1282a15–16. Cf. Schofield 2011, 294. Cf. also Aristotle’s suggestion in chapter 15 that a large group is less easily corrupted than a small (*Pol.* 1286a28–36).

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